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Vol. II.

Complete
In One Number.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
Ten Cents.

No. 25

The Gold Guide; OR, STEEL ARM, THE REGULATOR.

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CHAPTER I.

SAN FRANCISCO.

It was the end of November, 1849.
The rainy season forced the miners to leave the placers, the gold-seekers flocked in crowds to San Francisco.

Though this city had wonderfully developed since the two years which brought it into existence, it counted but five or six thousand houses and thirty thousand inhabitants or so.

The population every day was augmented by the multitude of strangers coming from all quarters of the globe. In spite of the tents and wooden huts which sprang up, as if by enchantment, around the houses of brick or stone, the strangers and miners filled them to such a degree that it became almost impossible to procure lodgings.

The hotels were crammed.

Even the worst apartments let at three or four hundred dollars a month.

Few of the travelers possessed, naturally, the necessary resources to boast the luxury of a chamber. Lucky indeed were those who could find an apartment with less than ten individuals already occupying it.

During one night, dark and rainy, twenty miners, in quest of a hotel, splashed through the muddy streets of San Francisco.

Five or six were mounted upon lean horses splattered with mud; the others progressed on foot, followed by a wagon containing their baggage.

Some, more economical or less lucky in their explorations, carried their clothing and cooking utensils wrapped round with one or two blankets. Pickaxes, axes, sometimes a cradle, completed the burden.

Though they arrived together at San Francisco, these miners had come from different placers. Chance alone united them on the way.

Amongst them were in almost equal numbers Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen and Mexicans. Some success had doubtless crowned their labors, for, notwithstanding the rain which fell in torrents and the mud-holes in which they went up to their knees, the travelers gaily conversed, mixing their pleasantries with curses upon the state into which the storm converted the streets.

"I see a hotel!" cried a Frenchman, an expeller of soap, named Louis Ribonne, whose accent sufficiently denoted his origin.

As he uttered these words, his eyes being fixed upon what he took for the sign of a hotel, he put his foot in a hole full of water, and fell his whole length in the midst of a black and foul-smelling mud.

The unfortunate Frenchman was quickly rescued by his mate.

The latter was a tall, thin Irishman, whom the miners knew by the designation of Paddy Shanty. He was a good-natured fellow.

While he raised Ribonne, a Mexican by the name of Enriquez Mundiaz directed the light of

exchanged, a boy of the hotel finally decided to open the door to the new-comers, of whom many seemed to him old acquaintances.

"Rooms, wine, rum, brandy, bread, food!" cried the miners.

With their long beards, strange dress and their clothing of gray cloth, covered with mud and water, the most of them would have been taken for robbers run to seed in any other country than California.

"We have all those—" began the boy.

"Hurrah!" the travelers shouted.

"Except rooms," continued he.

A chorus of curses wished him to the devil in English, French and Spanish.

"How, not one?" cried Jenkins; "I will pay whatever you ask."

"And we, also," said the other miners.

"I gave the last to a man not five minutes ago," replied the boy.

"So?"

"We are chock full, like an egg."

"The dining-room?"

"There are already twelve in it. Perhaps—"

"We'll see," cried the miners, pushing the boy aside and penetrating a place situated to the right of the entry.

A heavy wooden table occupied half the length of this apartment. The leaves of this table, unhinged and placed on the floor against the wall, served as beds to several individuals who already slept, rolled in their blankets, their heads upon their baggage instead of pillows.

The miners hastened to throw off their weighty burdens. Joe Plum, the servant of the hotel, put upon the table joints of roast meat, bread, pickles, pots of mustard, ham, wine, beer, and brandy.

As the miners seated themselves around the table, some upon stools, the others on benches, a new individual entered the apartment.

He was a man of thirty-five or forty years of age, tall and rather portly. Although he wore the same costume as the majority of the miners, it was easy to guess that he was a superior man to his companions. His face, which must have been remarkably fine in his

youth, had the impress of unruly passions; wrinkles deeply marked his features.

"Imp of hell!" cried he to Joe, "why did you not come when I called?"

"I was doing something else at the time," replied the boy without noticing his questioner's anger.

"Ah! Vandelles," exclaimed Ribonne. "good-evening—"

"Good-evening, Ribonne," replied Vandelles, shaking the other's hand.

"Is not that the duelist and gambler who killed Jim and Toby?" one of the miners asked his companion.

"The same," replied the latter, known



THE OUTLAW'S THREAT.

a lantern upon the sign, which proved to be one of a clothing store.

"No matter," said the Frenchman, "I am certain that there is a hotel in this street."

"Ribonne is right," said the Mexican, "for Jenkins went in advance. Every time that confounded Yankee enters a *posada* or *rancho*, one is sure that it is the best place."

Probably recollecting the truth of this remark the miners quickened their pace. They, indeed, found Jenkins at the door of a hotel.

As it was slow to be opened, kicks and blows showered upon the door with a vigor and rapidity which clearly announced belts well loaded with nuggets and gold dust. After some words

under the name of John Cradle. "I hope he will meet his match some day."

While the American muttered this in a low voice, some other miners came to shake hands with Vandelles, with that familiarity which, in life at the mines, is established so quick between men in conditions however different.

"So you also have arrived?" inquired they of the Frenchman, whose clothes seemed, like their own, covered with mud and water.

"At the same instant—Well, Joe, you dog," cried Vandelles, stopping the boy, "have you sworn to let us die of hunger and thirst? Where are the provisions I ordered you to carry to my chamber?"

Joe grumbled a reply, as he distributed the wine and beer to the miners.

"Stay to supper with us, Vandelles," said some of the men.

He hesitated a moment; then, like a man who has made up his mind, he whispered a few words to the boy.

"Be easy, sir," replied the latter; "I will carry to her all she wants."

"Stay," said Ribonne, "you have your—"

"Ribonne," interrupted Vandelles, "you forget that I detest prying questions."

"Well, well," replied his countryman, a little confused, "I shall henceforth follow your wishes."

"I wager you will," said Vandelles, dryly.

Then, seating himself by the side of the others, he vigorously attacked the rump-steak, ham, and pickles.

For some time there was heard nothing but the clicking of the knives and forks. At the end of a half hour of this exercise, accompanied with frequent libations, a merry conversation began between the miners.

They mixed grog, toddies and punch, lit pipes and cigars; before ten minutes, fifty voices rose at the same time.

Some sang, others recounted stories of the diggings with jokes which, hitting hard, caused bursts of laughter.

"Oh, if we had cards!" cried a Kentuckian.

"Ask the waiter," said Vandelles.

They awoke Joe, who was dozing in a corner.

He replied by a peremptory refusal.

"We have not a single pack of cards," added he; "besides, it is not usual to play at this time of night."

Interrupted by a burst of curses, Joe profited by a moment's pause to disappear.

"I have cards," said a Mexican, who had been aroused by the noise made by the carousers and who half rose from his bed at the end of the hall.

"Hand 'em over," cried five or six miners, running to him.

"Six fine new packs I bought this morning," added he.

"Give them," chorussed the miners.

"I want two hundred dollars."

"Satan twist your neck," said Jenkins. "For ten dollars one can buy double that number."

"Yes, if the shops were open."

In California, at this period, a man might be killed in a quarrel, without his antagonist fearing the rigor of justice; but, to make up for that, the least theft would expose him to immediate hanging. So no person thought to employ force in obtaining the Mexican's cards.

"Fifty dollars," ventured Jenkins.

"Good night," said the Mexican, arranging on his shoulders the folds of his zarape.

Vandelles took from his belt a pinch of gold dust, and picked out two or three lumps from it in his hand.

"Let all do like me," said he. "See, an ounce and a half for my share."

The miners followed the Frenchman's example, with more or less liberality.

The two hundred dollars were soon made up.

Vandelles, who in his hat had collected the gold, threw to the Mexican the gold dust and in exchange received the packs of cards.

"Room," cried he, approaching the table with a stool.

"What game shall we play?" asked Enriquez Mundiaz.

"Poker," said Jenkins.

"No, no," cried many miners, who suspected Jenkins of belonging to the honorable association of cheats.

"That is a game too convenient for black-legs," added a Mexican.

"What do you mean by that?" said Jenkins in a menacing tone.

"No quarrels," said Shanty, "take things aisy."

"A party at monte," proposed a Mexican.

His countrymen seconded the motion. The Americans still persevered in their intention of playing poker.

"We will play lansquenet," said Vandelles, who tranquilly listened to the dispute, shuffling the cards that he might the better mix the colors.

"We don't know the game," replied one or two persons.

"You will learn it quick enough. It is just like monte. Make your game, gentlemen; I take the bank."

"Why you, more than another?" exclaimed Jenkins.

Vandelles shrugged his shoulders without reply, and, throwing upon the table a certain quantity of gold dust, he laid his revolver upon it.

"I'll have a dig at the bank," continued Jenkins.

"Then, we'll try it with this," replied Vandelles, who put his hand upon the hilt of the hunting-knife suspended to his belt.

"Why not?" sneered Jenkins, loosening his bowie.

"Jenkins, do you want to be slashed?" said John Cradle in a low tone. "Jim handled the knife better than you, you know it. We'll break the head of this damned frog-eater in less than two minutes if he gives much more 'sass.' Hold on a bit."

After an instant's hesitation, Jenkins reseated himself, grumbling some menaces.

Vandelles, with a scornful air, opened his bank without a word of opposition.

No one could watch this man's manner of handling the gold and cards without seeing in him a player capable of sacrificing everything to his terrible passion.

With small scales, borrowed from one of the miners, he weighed successively in one of the plates each player's stake; he filled the other plate with an equal weight of gold dust which he placed in a little heap before him. Then he emptied upon the table the contents of each pile, looking from one to the other.

Fate declared for the banker.

In less than half an hour, Vandelles had accumulated before him many heaps of *pepites* and gold dust.

At this moment, the door was violently thrown open, and three new characters entered the apartment.

"The Goliaths!" muttered some miners, with an air of consternation.

"Bully!" cried Jenkins. "May I be cursed if Vandelles and big Tom will not be cutting each other's throats before an hour."

By the surname of Goliaths, well known throughout the placers, was designated two American brothers, whose true names were Smithson, and one of their cousins, Harry Kellow.

The elder, Tom, to whom the name of Goliath was more particularly applied, had a gigantic form (over six feet in height), and enormous limbs which de-

noted extraordinary strength. His hair, cut very short, stuck out like a brush above his straight low brow. A beard of light red, as rough as a buffalo's mane, came almost to the top of his cheeks. His small eyes, under thick brows and crossed with red veins, his rough voice, his insolent manners, all revealed wickedness, abuse of strength, intemperance and brutishness.

Philip, the second of the Smithsons, resembled his brother in everything save that he was a little smaller.

These two men, accused of many assassinations, were the terror of the placers.

They had for comrade, their usual accomplice, their cousin Harry, whose form, strength, vices and cruelty rendered him a worthy acolyte of his wild friends.

"Room," cried Tom, throwing insolently around him his ominous glance.

Almost all the men united around the table were vigorous, with all the force of mature age, their features exhibiting energy and resolution; yet such was the reputation of violence and ferocity of the Goliaths that no one obstructed the passage of the three colossus, who approached the gaming table.

"A game here," exclaimed Tom. "I don't want to run through all Dupont street to lose my ounces. Out of that, animal," continued he to a Mexican who, sick with fever, was leaning on the table.

As the poor fellow did not draw back quick enough from the giant's way, he was pushed so violently that he rolled to the other extremity of the room.

"Ha, there, keep quiet," shouted two or three sleepers who were awoke by this new kind of a projectile.

"Go to the devil, coyotes," replied Tom; "I'll begin with you if you don't dry up."

For a moment stunned by the shock, the Mexican drew his machete (a weapon half sword, half knife), and rushed upon his brutal aggressor. Tom grasped the poor fellow's arm, snatched away his machete, and again overthrew him with a blow in the breast. Yielding to a passion easy to understand, the Mexican a second time rushed upon Goliath, and probably would have struck him, when a vigorous arm clutched him by the leg.

He turned furiously, but, recognizing the individual who held him, he let escape an exclamation of joy and surprise.

"Steel-arm!" said he in an undertone, on seeing the new comer, who made him a sign.

As he pronounced the words, several persons near them heard them.

They quickly rose, and looked with much curiosity upon the man thus named.

Steelarm wrapped himself up in his zarape, and waved back the miners who came around him to eagerly tender their hands.

All replied to him by a smile and an amicable nod of the head, as if to promise silence and at the same time to express the pleasure which his presence caused.

He pulled down his Spanish *sombrero* and raised up the folds of his fine Saltillo zarape almost to his ears; then, approaching the table, he stood silently watching behind a group of miners.

CHAPTER II.

THE GAMING TABLE.

THE personage, so celebrated in the mines of California under the surname of Steel-arm, was of middling form but admirably proportioned.

In countries where one is obliged to fight for fortune and for life, one quickly values his own force as well as that of every person he encounters. Under Pablo's appearance, a little frail at first

sight, a skintu eye would promptly discover a prodigious strength and uncommon ability to withstand fatigue. His movements were elastic and free; his bronzed tint showed what suns he had passed under.

The impassibility of his physiognomy formed a strange contrast with the extraordinary brilliancy of his large black eyes, which seemed always to contemplate some mysterious figure in the far-off world of thoughts.

In addressing him, he was usually called by his Christian name of Pablo.

"Jose," inquired he of the Mexican, who, standing by him, darted looks of resentment upon the elder Smithson, "from which placer came the Goliaths?"

"I know not," answered Jose. "These bandits do not stay long in one place. When they play a bad move, they go to another spot to renew their thieving. Believe me, Steel-arm, never could you render a greater service to us all than by ridding us of those three villains."

As the Mexican finished these words, Vandelles, who had lost a heavy stake, violently struck the table, swearing like a heathen.

He pushed the bank to his right hand neighbor, and recommenced the weighing out of new heaps.

In the movement which he made to raise the scales of gold dust, a diamond ring, of singular form, which was upon the little finger of his left hand, suddenly attracted Steel-arm's attention.

An expression of sad surprise passed over his face, habitually so impassible.

He quickly approached the players, his eyes fixed upon the ring.

After a few minutes of silent examination, he opened his belt, took from it a little buckskin bag, and, selecting a nugget weighing about four pounds, he threw it upon the table.

"The devil!" said Vandelles, regarding with astonishment the bold player who staked a thousand dollars upon a game.

"Do you run me?" demanded Steel-arm.

"Without a doubt," answered Vandelles.

He poured upon the table an equal quantity of gold dust, and played, turning up two aces.

"Won," said he, gathering up the heaps.

Steel-arm put down a new stake, much larger than the first.

He was no more fortunate with that than before.

He lost successively five or six games without the least expression of emotion upon his face.

At the seventh game, seeing that his bag of gold dust was almost empty, he upturned it completely.

A few ounces only fell into his hand.

"Well?" inquired Vandelles, seeing that his adversary could not play a stake.

All the spectators, grouped around the table, looked upon Pablo with a curiosity more easy to be understood as they believed they recognized him.

"Wait," said Pablo to Vandelles.

He let fall his zarape, threw his hat upon the table, and turned towards the miners.

"Steel-arm!" cried they with a satisfied expression.

The neighbors of Pablo pressed around him to shake his hand; others approached quickly, or mounted upon their benches to look upon him or make some friendly sign.

The Goliaths themselves rose precipitate from their seats, and for some time regarded Pablo, while speaking in a low tone.

"Do we play or not?" queried Vandelles, whose passion for gaming stifled his curiosity.

"Who will lend me some gold?" inquired Steel-arm.

Vandelles laughed.

"Miners seldom lend."

To his great stupification all the arms were extended to Pablo, who was at a loss to choose between the bags and belts which was offered to him.

"Thank you, my friends," said the latter, without appearing astonished at this eagerness so extraordinary. "Who amongst you was most fortunate this year?"

"I, I," cried five or six miners, among whom were Jose, Guerino, Cradle, Ribonne and Shanty.

"Pass me what gold you have," said Pablo.

They obeyed with a satisfied air, as they would have done if Steel-arm had announced that his intention was to throw it away.

"What the deuce does this mean?" inquired Vandelles of one of his neighbors. "If the richest of us was to ask for a pound of gold from his best friend, with a promise to return it the next day, he would not obtain it; and yet here gold is thrown to this man who has lost all he himself possessed."

"I would give all I possessed to be in Jose's place," replied the miner, while Pablo threw upon the table the gold he had received without taking the pains to weigh it. "The five or six ounces which he has lent to Steel-arm will make his fortune."

Vandelles would have addressed the other some further questions, but, at this moment, Pablo advanced a new stake, and the play recommenced.

The banker turned up a seven for himself and a jack for Steel-arm, many cards followed without a result.

"Seven! I have won," cried Vandelles.

"How much have you before you?" quietly asked Pablo.

"Seventy-two pounds and nine ounces, (\$20,000)," responded Vandelles, at the end of some minutes occupied in weighing the dust and pieces.

"Banquo," said Steel-arm.

Upon a gesture from him, the belts and bags were again extended towards him.

The Goliaths themselves after consulting a moment, followed the example of the other miners.

Tom held out a buckskin sack containing at least a dozen pounds of gold.

Pablo pushed it back.

"Why do you refuse?" said Goliath in an irritated voice.

"Because that gold is the fruit of theft and assassination," replied Pablo in the calmest voice imaginable.

A weighty silence followed his words. Goliath grumbled some menaces; but before anything intelligible had been uttered, the game commenced.

"Ah!" said Vandelles, reflecting upon the enormous sum he was risking, "it is perhaps more prudent not to play."

"Then, I take it," said Pablo.

"No," continued Vandelles, after an instant's hesitation, "I shall go on to the end. A four for me, a nine for you."

Then in the midst of the deepest silence, he successively laid down a five, a seven, another seven, and a two.

"Nine!" cried the miners, their words sounding as from a single voice.

"Hell and curses!" exclaimed Vandelles, striking with his fist the card which gave the game to his antagonist.

"I will buy your bank for two hundred dollars," said Pablo to the man who replaced Vandelles.

"Very well," returned the miner.

"Make your game, gentlemen," said Steel-arm shuffling the cards.

It was a thing so unusual to see Pablo touch a card, that the miners looked

around inquiringly as if to demand what it meant.

Vandelles, with fixed eyes and frowning eyebrows, threw upon the table all the gold he had, but luck was against him.

The bank won it at the first stroke.

"Nothing, nothing more," cried he, after searching all his pouches with that rage of a gambler unable to satisfy his favorite passion.

"You have jewels," observed Pablo, "a watch, a ring; will you play them against five pounds of gold?"

"This ring alone is worth more than a thousand dollars," replied Vandelles, showing the ring which had so much excited Steel-arm's attention.

"Ten pounds, if you wish."

A contraction of the other's features revealed the violent struggle in his mind.

"No," said he with an effort.

"Speak no more. There was perhaps a means of recovering your money. Your games are made gentlemen?"

Two games succeeded, with the stakes passing to Steel-arm.

At the end of them Vandelles could not resist.

"Will you give fifteen pounds of gold for these jewels and this ring?" asked he of Pablo.

"That is more than they are worth," replied the other; "but, no odds, I'll take it."

Vandelles took off the ring and threw it with the other jewels upon the table.

"Lost again!" cried he an instant after.

He went out blaspheming, and slammed the door with such violence that the whole house resounded.

"So you have turned player?" said an old Mexican to Pablo, who continued the bank.

"A mere whim," returned Steel-arm. "I am already tired—I pass the bank."

He made a sign for those who had lent him gold to come around him to be repaid.

An expression of disappointment was upon the miners' countenances, while Pablo returned to each a quantity of gold double what he had borrowed.

"That is not all," said Pablo, remarking it. "I have your names and will guide you on your next trip. You shall form two parties."

The miners to whom these words were addressed uttered a joyful cry.

The others felicitated them, but not without a feeling of envy.

"If you will sell your share, Jose," said one of the miners to the Mexican, "I will give you ten pounds of gold."

"No, no," cried Jose. "If I don't die on the road, my fortune will be made."

"It is not our fault if you did not receive our gold, Steel-arm," said the miner turning to the other; "we offered it to you in good faith."

"So you did," responded Steel-arm, after an instant's reflection. "Interested or not, your good will deserves a recompense. You are twenty-two altogether—fourteen have my promise—well! let the eight others form a third band under Jenkin's command."

"Three cheers for Steel-arm!" cried the miners.

"We are twenty-four," said a voice from the bottom of the room.

"James and Pepe are not counted,"

"Why not, Don Pablo?" asked James advancing. "We were as eager as the others —"

"You know too well the reason of your exclusion," interrupted Pablo. "You two promised me that you would reserve a third part of your proceeds from the placer of San Benito for the widow and children of poor Limby. I learned the other day that you broke

your promise. You shall never receive aught from me henceforth."

"We will give the part to the widow," muttered Pepe.

"And you shall double it," continued Pablo. "If to-morrow at mid-day the poor woman does not receive the two-thirds of thirty-five pounds, I shall claim her share."

"Then do we go with our comrades?" asked James.

"No," replied Steel-arm firmly.

The two men retired with lowered heads, behind the other miners.

At the same moment, Vandelles entered, carrying in his hand a deerskin bag, elegantly embroidered, which seemed to contain some gold.

He played a game, winning some money.

When his turn to cut arrived, he had before him five or six pounds of gold dust.

"So you have given up the bank, Steel-arm?" said he, raising his voice so that Pablo might hear him.

"That is the custom here, you know," replied Pablo. "Nevertheless, I have gained sixty pounds of you, and I am ready to play them in one stake if you take it. But I mean this game to be the last, win or lose."

"I have but ten pounds and a few ounces. Will you play?" demanded Vandelles.

"Willingly."

Vandelles turned up a king.

It was his adversary's card.

"Lost again!" cried he angrily. "Luck is this evening against me!"

"Take this if you like," said Pablo, pushing the stakes to the Frenchman.

"But if I lose?" replied Vandelles.

"You can pay it back after the next trip."

Vandelles hesitated an instant; but the love of play possessed him so strongly that he had not the courage to resist the temptation. He stammered some thanks, and continued to play with different results. He had lost nearly all, when a quarrel arose between him and the elder of the Goliaths upon the subject of some doubtful card.

"We are cheated?" cried the colossus, ever ready to find a pretext of dispute.

"You lie, dog of a Yankee," retorted Vandelles, who had indeed played fairly.

"You cheated! I shall take back my stake."

"I dare you to touch it."

The American extended his large hand towards the little sack of gold dust which was the subject of the contest, and pulled it towards him.

Unable to stop his arm, despite all his efforts, the maddened Vandelles scattered with a vigorous dash of his hand the dust which Tom was about returning to his belt. Goliath's response was a blow of his fist which sent the Frenchman reeling and finally falling against the table.

Vandelles leaped up, and attempted to draw his revolver; but at the same instant, Tom clutched his wrist, preventing the possibility of his using his weapon.

Endowed with remarkable vigor and that excited by anger, Vandelles made prodigious efforts to free himself from the iron grasp which paralyzed his movements. His left arm remaining at liberty, he seized Goliath by the throat. The latter carried his hand to his belt, drawing a knife which he opened between his his teeth. At the moment when he sought to strike his antagonist, Vandelles rushed upon him with such impetuosity that the two fell together, making the apartment tremble with the shock.

They struggled some instants, but Goliath's strength was too much for the Frenchman.

The latter was under him; then, holding him down with his knee and left hand, he endeavored to disengage his

right hand which Vandelles held with the energy of despair.

The Frenchman was weaponless; in falling, he had lost his revolver, which Goliath, with a kick, had sent under the table.

Ranged in a circle around the two adversaries, the miners considered them with great curiosity.

From the celebrity of the two champions, no one ventured to interfere.

Another player had profited by the occasion to take the bank, and the party continued to play on without attending to the quarrel.

Ribonne made two attempts to bring help to his countryman.

Philip and Harry, Tom's brother and cousin, threw themselves before him, repulsing him roughly with threatening words.

"Do you give up, you blasted Frenchman?" cried Goliath.

"No no!" replied Vandelles energetically, although he was almost stifled under the enormous weight of his gigantic adversary.

By an unexpected movement, Goliath disengaged his right arm and bandished his knife with a savage cry of triumph.

At the same movement, the throng of miners was suddenly parted before Steel-arm.

The latter seized the giant's arm and, wrenching the knife from his grasp, he threw it under the table to rejoin Vandelles's revolver. Tom made an angry growl, while Philip and Harry threw themselves upon Steel-arm.

The American receded a step, and rolling his zarape around his arm to serve as a buckler, he stood ready to receive the two enemies.

Some miners made a movement as if to defend him, but he thrust them aside.

With a bound like a tiger, he fell upon Philip, who was reaching his hand with the knife to his brother who still held the Frenchman down.

Philip rolled upon the ground.

Harry drew his machete and made a cut at Pablo. The latter received the stroke upon his left arm and struck him full in the breast.

The Goliath staggered back two or three paces and fell as if dead.

At the same instant, a ball passed whistling a few inches above Pablo's forehead.

To dart upon Philip, who had fired the shot, to pull away the pistol, and to lay him to the floor with a blow of the butt-end upon his head, was to Pablo but the work of a second.

"Look out, Steel-arm!" cried the miners

Leaving Vandelles stunned, and knocking down poor Jose, who bravely opposed him, Tom rushed upon Pablo.

Before Steel-arm had time to draw his machete, the American's bowie-knife descended upon him with lightning rapidity.

Pablo, by a bound to one side, avoided the terrible cut which would have cleft his skull, and loosened his machete.

"Let no one touch us!" cried he to the miners.

The latter obeyed.

They contented themselves in holding Philip and preventing him going to his brother's rescue.

After the first passes, Goliath, who commenced to recover his coolness, saw that, notwithstanding his strength and skill in handling a bowie-knife, he could not long withstand the superiority of Steel-arm.

A blow of the machete had carried away half of his ear, and slightly cut his shoulder.

The giant uttered a cry of rage. Renewing the same manoeuvre that had so well served him in his contest with Vandelles, he grasped with his left hand the right arm of Pablo.

The latter made the same movement.

The two found themselves face to face, each seeking to release his right hand at the same time that he held his antagonist's immovable.

CHAPTER III.

THE STRUGGLE.

At the first glance cast upon the two combatants, there seemed no doubt as to the issue of the contest.

Still the latter had not given way an inch.

His form revealed nothing of the force by which he resisted the giant's pressure.

Tom's visage, on the contrary, little by little became enpurpled. His eyes started out. Sweat ran in great globules down his cheeks. Towering above Pablo from his immense height, he at first had fixed upon him his small ferocious eyes.

The brilliant glance of the American finished by striking a chill to Tom's heart, and made him turn away his looks as if from the point of a dagger.

Twice the colossus, uniting all his power had attempted by a sudden shock to break from the resistance he encountered.

Each time, Pablo's arm had given way a second, but, like a band of steel covered with velvet, his hand had reclosed with more strength.

Soon Pablo's superiority became evident.

The broken respiration and the contraction of his features were felt by Goliath himself, who knew that his antagonist saw into the terror and fatigue he experienced.

Making a desperate effort, Tom pressed forward, and with his bowie-knife pierced the other's left shoulder.

The miners made an exclamation; but Pablo had already the advantage.

They saw his machete approach the giant's breast by a motion, steady, continued, and irresistible.

Goliath was a horrible sight.

He foamed like a boar caught in a snare, his face distorted with rage was covered with sweat and blood.

He ground his teeth, and cursed most fearfully.

A few paces from him, Philip struggling with the miner who had disarmed him, was endeavoring by vain efforts to help his brother, when he was menaced with certain death.

The two brothers, with all their vices and crimes, had one sentiment which approached of humanity, it was the affection they bore one another.

A death-like silence reigned through the apartments; every breast rose and fell painful under the weight of emotion.

"Mercy," muttered Goliath, knowing that his arm grew enfeebled, and seeing the bright point of the machete scarce two inches from his breast.

"No," returned Steel-arm, "it would be a crime to let a miscreant like you live."

"But I never have done anything to you, Steel-arm?" said the giant.

"You have abused your strength to rob and murder poor lone miners—recommend your soul to God, if you still know how to pray."

Goliath made an effort to shake off his implacable foe; but Pablo withstood the shock, and by a quick movement thrust the machete upon the other.

"Mercy in the name of heaven!" suddenly cried a feminine voice from the bottom of the room.

The voice produced an extraordinary effect upon Pablo.

He released his enemy and turned quickly.

"Who spoke?" demanded he with visible emotion, while his flashing eyes fixed themselves, turn by turn, upon everyone who surrounded him.

None responded.

One of the miners pointed to the door. Pablo opened it precipitately, but his eyes vainly explored the entire length of the corridor.

The sound of a second door being closed at the end of the corridor told the young American that some one had re-entered from the hall.

Pablo's first movement was to rush to that side, but remarking that many miners had followed him, he turned back to the apartment.

All regarded him with a sort of stupefaction which proved how seldom he had shown signs of the like emotion.

He passed his hand over his brow and retook, in a few seconds all his impassibility.

"Goliath," said he to the giant, who was staunching the blood which flowed from the wound, "to-day I give you mercy; but remember this well; at the first crime committed by your brother or yourself, I shall go in your pursuit and slay you two, even if all California must be gone over. Ask all around; they will say that never has Steel-arm broken his word. Release that man," added he to the miners who still held the second Smithson.

They obeyed with visible regret.

Philip ran to his brother.

The two exchanged a few words in a low tone.

They left the saloon bearing the body of their cousin Harry.

"We shall meet again!" said Tom, shaking his fist at Pablo, as he opened the door.

Then, yielding to a burst of rage, he levelled his revolver and fired at Steel-arm, whom he missed.

The miners expected to see Pablo rush upon the villain, but they were deceived.

"Why the deuce do you not kill him?" cried some miners with a sort of disappointment; "you know what crimes they have committed!"

"What has become of Mr. Vandelles?" inquired Steel-arm, without replying to the unchristian wish.

The unlucky Frenchman's head had been so violently dashed upon the floor by Goliath, that Vandelles was left senseless. By this time, however, he had recovered a little and was lying upon a bench.

Upon hearing his name, he pulled a full glass of brandy towards him and swallowed it at a draught. Re-animated by the fiery beverage, and supported by the table, he advanced to Steel-arm.

He thanked his rescuer with a constrained and embarrassed air, which did not escape the American's penetrating eye.

"I would not see you murdered," interrupted Pablo with cold politeness. "I have done no more for you than would any one here. More to them than to me should be addressed your thanks."

Vandelles uttered a sigh like a man relieved from some painful obligation.

He went to thank the miners who received his acknowledgments with a rather astonished air.

Ribonne, alone replied.

He then left the apartment.

Pablo followed him with his eyes, and seemed twice or thrice upon the point of recalling him.

But he let him pass without addressing him a word.

As soon as the sound of the footsteps of Vandelles had ceased to resound, Pablo quitted the room, making a sign to the miners not to follow.

During his absence, the miners, with greatly excited curiosity, gathered in little groups, amidst a throng of conjectures upon Steel-arm's emotion, and upon the mercy he had shown to Goliath.

"I think," said Cradle, "that the person who called out for Goliath's pardon, was that short young fellow who raised

Vandelles while we were looking upon the fight. I am very sure, also, that it is the same who went out when Steel-arm ran to the door, for since that moment no one can see him."

"It was the voice of a woman that we heard, and not that of a man," observed Enriquez Mundiaz.

"But it might be a woman in man's clothes."

"Hold!" cried Ribonne, "perhaps—"

He stopped, for Steel-arm entered.

The latter shook hands with the miners; then without saying a word to any one, he wrapped himself up in his zarape, threw himself upon the table leaf, serving as his bed, and appeared to dispose himself for sleep.

Jose who lay near him, and whom the fever prevented from sleeping, said, the next morning, that Steel-arm had been awake all night.

CHAPTER IV.

BERTHA.

QUITTING the chamber where had occurred the foregoing incidents, Vandelles traversed the whole of the corridor.

Having arrived at the other extremity, he stopped before a door and knocked in a peculiar manner.

"Is that you, Edward?" asked a female voice.

"Yes, it is I," grumbled he ill-humorously.

A key turned in the lock.

Vandelles entered a little chamber, where a chair and a sort of bed comprised the entire furniture.

A brass lamp threw a dim glimmer over the desolate apartment, beside which a country cottage would seem a palace.

Vandelles slammed the door violently behind him, and fell upon the chair against the back of which he leaned his aching brow.

A woman, still young, with remarkable beauty, but whose thin form revealed cruel trials, silently clasped her hands and raised them to heaven, while her eyes filled with sorrow.

"What has happened, Edward?" inquired she, after an instant's silence.

"Edward?" added she, seeing that Vandelles hesitated.

"Can you not guess?" said he finally, with an accent of rage. "I have lost all, all—all—"

A torrent of curses flowed from his lips, and his hand grew tightly clenched.

"And my ring," suddenly cried the young woman, "where is it? You have not played that, at last."

Vandelles lowered his head and remained silent.

"But the ring was not yours," said the young woman. "When you came an hour ago to take the few ounces of gold I still kept as a last resource—I knew too well what would become of it. We have not a dollar more to pay our board and lodging."

"Bertha!" interrupted Vandelles.

"Yes," continued she with the energy of despair, "I am sure that there remains not an ounce of all that which you amassed with so much danger and labor. You have sacrificed it all to your love of play, I knew it would be so, and yet I had the weakness to give you the slender resources which I had saved in expectation of an event alas! now realized. But that ring, you had no right to dispose of it."

"Hellfire!" cried Vandelles enraged. "With a woman dressing herself for a display I can understand this attachment to the cursed jewel. Is the person who gave it to you so very dear?"

A lively color came upon the young woman's cheek.

"The ring belonged to a friend of my mother."

"That is the most you assured me," returned Vandelles frowning. "Well, I shall get it back, I shall not be always unlucky—the devil—"

The throbbing blood in his head was so painful that he closed his eyes and could not continue. His hands rose to his head and he rolled from the chair to the ground.

Bertha uttered a scream of alarm.

Then forgetting all her just grief, and well-founded sorrow, she bent over the wounded man with the tenderest care.

In his struggle with Goliath, Vandelles had not received a serious wound; but from the pressure upon his breast and the blows upon his skull, the blood had rushed to his head with such violence that it appeared as if stifling him.

His wife hastened to unloose his cravat, and throw some water upon him. This would not probably have sufficed had not Vandelles in falling received a light wound which letting out some blood, saved his life.

At the end of a quarter of an hour, he was able to stand and to listen to the hopes which Bertha was seeking to inspire him with, though the poor woman was herself far from sharing in them.

"I am a wretch and deserve to die," cried he with despair perhaps a little exaggerated.

The poor woman had the generosity to make an effort to justify him to his own eyes.

With that eagerness which everyone feels to accept excuses, good or bad, to right one's conduct, Edward ended by being convinced.

He adopted fifty plans to remake his fortune and withstand the difficulties of their position.

Though far from believing her husband's illusive plans, Bertha feigned the greatest confidence in the future, and turned from the painful subject of conversation.

"What has happened?" said she, "I thought I heard a pistol-shot."

"In fact," replied Vandelles, "I think one of the Goliath's fired at a man named Steel-arm. I wish I better knew that man. He puzzles me more than I can tell."

"Was he wounded?" rejoined the young woman with a trembling voice.

"I think not. At that moment I lost all my senses. By the by, did I not hear your voice—were you not in the room?" added he seeing her cast down her eyes.

"Yes, an instant," replied the young woman hesitatingly.

"How came you there?" said he frowning.

"I heard a pistol-shot," the young woman hastened to say. "I know you are so violent, so quarrelsome—above all when you lose—I feared there had something happened to you. That fear carried away all other considerations—besides, as I am dressed almost like a man, no one remarked."

"I wish it more than I hope it," continued he, with that injustice common to the jealous. "So you saw the fight between Goliath and Steel-arm? Oh! that both had been killed! I hate those two men, one as much as the other! It was Steel-arm who won all I possessed. Did you ever hear speak of this man, Bertha?"

Mrs. Vandelles did not reply.

Either giving way to fatigue or wishing to avoid the subject of conversation, she let her head fall upon the miserable bed, and seemed to sleep.

Her husband contemplated her silently for some minutes, with an expression of such different sentiments, that no painter could produce them.

"Poor woman," muttered he at last. "What sadness to be married to me. Oh! I swear to renounce this passion

which destroys me. I wish to become rich for her, that henceforth her life may be one of luxury and riches. Had it not been for that cursed nine I should have won. Curse lansquenet! *monte* and *baccarat* are better. Another time I shall calculate otherwise —"

Swearing to give up playing, the unfortunate gamester fell asleep, calculating new combinations of *monte* and *lansquenet*.

CHAPTER V.

REVELATIONS.

VANDELLES, fearing Bertha's accusing glance, and thinking of the difficulties of procuring money, made up his mind to escape from his cares by flying from her presence when she could not recal him.

He left the chamber taking all possible precaution not to trouble his wife's slumber.

"Where are you going?" asked Ribonne, who met him upon the corridor and took his arm familiarly.

"I hardly know," replied Vandelles, "I was going to take a turn through the city."

"Will you breakfast with me?"

"Willingly," said Vandelles, glad of anything which might force him to forget his gloomy thoughts.

"Let's go to Delmonico's," continued Ribonne.

Twenty minutes after, they were seated at a little table, a waiter bringing them a bill of fare.

"Do you like eggs," said Ribonne, "here are some from France."

"From France," echoed Vandelles laughing.

"Yes."

And he passed over the card, on which was "Eggs fresh from France at one dollar a piece."

"The deuce!" said Vandelles, "rather dear in this country."

"Bah! what matter," cried Ribonne gaily, "they have nothing too good for us."

He retook the card, ordering a sumptuous breakfast.

"So your placer of the *Maladetto* is rich?" inquired Vandelles.

"No, but since Steel-arm accepted my gold —"

"Well?"

"Well, I am one of the six of the first expedition, and I would not give my share for forty pounds—nor sixty."

"Ah! who is this mysterious man to whom everybody has so much deference?"

"Have you not heard of Steel-arm?"

"Yes, but vaguely. He is a gold-hunter, a *gambusino*?"

"Yes, but a *gambusino* from mere liking of the pursuit."

"You know not how I am puzzled. What is the history of Pablo?"

"Well, I know no more than what you can hear anywhere, I think that no person can tell the tale of his life. What is certain, is that his true name is Pablo Verrers. His father came originally from New York, and was slain, so they say, sometime ago, in an encounter with the Kinklas Indians. Pablo lived in a hacienda near the Mission of San Jose. His strength, skill, and bravery have made him celebrated. It was two years, I think, after his mother's death, when he sold all his property, without anybody guessing his motive. Then he travelled alone through all California with no other protection than his machete, pistol and rifle. He visits each placer, passing a day or two there, sometimes rendering services to the miners. If he meets some poor devil who has lost his provisions, from some bear, a jaguar or a bandit, they go off together. He never returns without the food, destroying the bear or

killing the bushwhacker. Some assert that, alone, he has rid the country of twenty grizzlies."

"Twenty!" said Vandelles incredulously, "that is too strong."

"I am of your idea; but, admitting an exaggeration, there remains some at least. My own eyes have seen Steel-arm kill a great grizzly, at twenty paces from me, whom he let come almost to him before he fired the bullet which stretched him on the ground."

"The bear killed at one shot?"

"No, not quite; but two pistol-shots in his ear finished him in less time than it takes me to tell it. And all that, my dear friend, with the same coolness as you would twist the neck of a pigeon."

"I suppose he receives a good price for his services?"

"He does not give folks time for thanks."

"Then, he sells the placers he discovers?"

"No, he gives them—that is just why I call him an amateur *gambusino*."

"But why does he risk so much for nothing?"

"When Pablo meets with 'pockets'—and they say he has a particular talent in discovering them—you understand he is not long in knocking off some nuggets with his *barreta* (an iron pike), then he continues his route after having discovered the pocket, and taken all necessary indications, that he may afterwards point it out to the unfortunate miners whom he encounters."

"Then he receives his share?"

"No—only, he reserves his finest discoveries for an occasion which may offer. Last year, a poor Englishman, after passing two months at a mine, became sick, and was forced to sell his tools. One day as he was cutting wood in the forest with his axe, the only article he had left, he luckily came upon Steel-arm extended bleeding, near the corpse of a grizzly. He raised him, took the greatest care of him, and gave him his last cup of tea —"

"Well?" said Vandelles, impatient at seeing Ribonne make a pause to add, doubtless, more to the solemnity of his recital.

"Well, three months after, the Englishman returned to San Francisco, with sixty pounds of gold or more, and told Jenkins and Cradle what you have just heard."

"That explains why such deference is shown to him. What design can he have in wandering from placer to placer?"

"That is what no one can guess. When you attempt to touch upon that subject, he looks at you—well, I assure you that I envy no one who begins questioning him after that look."

"But, in conversing?"

"He never converses, never—a real statue, my friend. They were speaking this morning, as of an extraordinary event, how twice during last night he let escape emotion."

"Bah!" said Vandelles, "how so?"

"That is the question," said Ribonne, who, naturally talkative, had become still more so, under the influence of the wine and liquors. "In fact, it was of the ring which he won of you."

"That ring!" cried Edward frowning.

"Yes, he examined it with extraordinary attention. What the deuce have you done?" added the Frenchman seeing his friend put his glass upon the table with such violence that the crystal burst into shivers.

"I? nothing, nothing," muttered Vandelles through his close-set teeth; "I listened to you with such attention that I forgot the glass. After all the damage is not great. But you spoke of two instants of emotion—what was the second?"

"Ah! ah!" laughed Ribonne, winking facetiously, "I understand that better

At the moment when a woman —"

"Bah!" interrupted Vandelles, upsetting two full glasses of rum, "of what woman do you speak?"

"At the moment when Steel-arm was about to send that Goliath to the other world, a female's voice cried 'Mercy!' That time, Steel-arm appeared as moved as a miner who discovers a *bonanza*, and Tom escaped the fate he so well deserved."

"A woman amongst us?" inquired Vandelles, his face appearing most frightfully contracted.

"I suppose so, but she remained but a moment," said he—"well what is it now?" added he seeing Vandelles quickly rise and move towards the door. "Vandelles! the bottle is not empty, and I—Vandelles, Vandelles—wait!"

He ran after his friend, who, already in the street, was walking with great strides.

One of the waiters hurried to bar the Frenchman's passage to get the money for the breakfast.

"Yes, yes, in an hour," replied Ribonne; "but now I wish to join —"

"Close the door, you others," cried the waiter to the comrades who hastened to obey. "Before going out, sir, you must pay your bill."

"Eh! do you fancy I mean to swindle?" cried the Frenchman angrily. "Let us see this bill, quick, quick!"

"Twenty-eight dollars and seventy-five cents," cried the waiter who went back to the table to see that nothing was gone.

One of the waiters was by the door.

Two others were near the Frenchman.

He hastened to pay the bill and rushed out. Without knowing what had provoked Vandelles' sudden exit, he felt a vague apprehension of having committed some foolish act.

CHAPTER VI.

JEALOUSY.

THE apartment in which slept Steel-arm, Ribonne, and the other miners, was intended to serve as a dining-room in the day, so the sleepers were forced to rise at daybreak.

Everyone unrolled his blanket, carefully arranged the rest of his baggage, and went out in the city to change his gold for money.

Pablo, alone, was seated in the embrasure of a window, examining some papers which he had. At the end of a few minutes, Joe opened the door and looked around the room inquisitively.

"I am alone," said Steel-arm rising, "Enter."

Joe obeyed, and approached Pablo who exhibited impatience and anxiety.

"Mr. Vandelles has gone," said the waiter in a mysterious tone. "She is alone —"

"That is well," said Pablo.

Then he resumed after a moment's silence:

"Joe, here is the money I promised you. Wait. If you are discreet, and I have the certainty that you speak of this to no one, I shall give more on my departure and more still on my return."

"Be easy, Steel-arm," replied the waiter, astonished at such generosity. "I'd let my tongue be torn out before I say a word."

"But," continued Pablo, "at the least failure on your part, I will blow out your brains if I have to hunt you through the State."

"Count upon me," said Joe.

"Stay in the entry, and if you hear Mr. Vandelles, let me know."

Steel-arm left the room, going towards Vandelles' chamber.

At the door he stopped.

Twice, he raised his hand to knock, and twice he let it fall without having decided.

This man so celebrated for his calmness and energy, trembled like a child.

At the moment when he finally determined to knock, the door opened, and Bertha appeared upon the threshold.

"Mr. Verrers!" cried she falling back.

"Will you be so good as to grant me an instant's interview?" murmured Pablo supplicatingly.

"My husband is not here," stammered the young woman. "I dare not."

Visibly moved, Bertha could not finish the phrase.

She made a movement to close the door.

"I wish to speak with you," said he in a sad and respectful tone.

"It is impossible—retire, I beg of you."

"I go if you require it, Bertha; but in the name of our former friendship, let me speak to you, if only for five minutes."

She made a negative gesture, Steel-arm hesitated a moment, then, making up his mind, he entered and closed the door behind him.

Madame Vandelies uttered a stifled cry, fell upon the chair, and hid her head between her hands.

With a rapid glance, Pablo scrutinized the bare and naked chamber in which he was. "Poor woman!" murmured he in a low tone.

Tears fell from his eyes.

"Madame," said he at last, "pardon me for having entered here despite your will. I swear upon my honor that as soon as you request it I will leave this chamber; but listen, I entreat you."

"What have you to say to me?" inquired she finally, unable to resist the young American's suppliant and respectful accent. "Hasten, I conjure you, for if my husband arrives, he will kill us both."

"If he dares to lay a hand upon you before me!" cried Pablo with flashing eyes.

"You would kill him?" interrupted Bertha. "Then what would become of me?"

"Do you love him so well?" asked Steel-arm.

"He is my husband."

"And do you love him?" still persisted the American.

"Yes," replied she.

He lowered his head, and his features revealed suffering.

An indefinable sensation of joy mixed with sorrow crossed the young woman's heart.

"You have something to tell me?" began she after another instant's silence.

"Bertha," said Pablo, passing his hand across his brow to collect his thoughts, "you are unhappy."

"You deceive yourself, Mr. Verrers."

"The word which I have employed but poorly expresses my idea. One is never unhappy with him she loves, I know that, I wish to say that you have lost your fortune—that you are ruined."

Pablo's voice trembled in pronouncing these words.

His touching accent and the expression of his face revealed a sympathy so true, a fear so poignant of hurting the young woman's self-love, that Bertha could not reply but with an affirmative sign.

"I was indirectly apprised, two years ago, that you had gone to the placers with your husband, who came to the Hacienda of San Fernando some days before my return to take you away, but I was ignorant that Mr. Marel and Mr. Vandelles were the same person."

"The very natural feeling of hiding our position decided my husband to take the name of Vandelles on going for the placers."

"That was how my researches were

baffled. During the past two years I have been through California from border to border. By a strange fatality the only time perhaps which I have visited this place I met Mr. Marel."

"We are in a strange country, far from all other miners."

"Your husband is jealous, is he not?"

An involuntary gesture from Bertha answered instead of words.

"I still counted upon meeting you some day, when chance —. You promised me to always preserve that ring," added he, showing to Bertha the ring he had won the preceding evening.

She lowered her eyes, and stammered some words of excuse.

"Did he force it from you?" continued he. "It was the last remembrance of my mother that you gave him, Bertha."

There was such profound sorrow in the young man's tones, that Bertha felt as if her heart was about to break.

"Pardon me," murmured she through her tears.

"I afflict you," said he, "I am wrong. I promised myself not to speak of it, but when pressed by you — We will say no more of it. Permit me to speak to you as a friend, as a brother. You are not made for this sad and perilous existence, Bertha; my heart bleeds to think what you must have undergone in the placers. This state of things must not endure. To return to Europe, to occupy the rank which Mr. Marel and his family should occupy, to be happy in fact, there requires but one thing—wealth. Well, Bertha, in the name of our former friendship, in the name of that love which made my life, and which you have broken by your indifference, allow me the right of contributing to your happiness. Take this letter," continued he, holding it out to her, "and promise to profit by its contents."

Too much affected to reply, Bertha took the paper which the young man held out.

"This paper," said he, "contains all the necessary details to lead you to a placer of the greatest richness, which I but lately discovered. A few days will suffice for your husband to obtain many hundred pounds of gold. If my presence is not to you a burden, I will accompany you. If the sole thought of having me near you, is an obstacle, well, I will give you two guides, two men whom I pledge to be sure and whom I will pay. All I ask is that, before your departure for Europe, you will let me know if your prospecting was successful, and that you leave rich and happy. Then I will thank heaven for making me useful to you, and you shall hear of me no more."

"You think me ungrateful?" murmured the poor woman who did not dare look at Pablo for fear that he might read in her eyes the thoughts which swelled her heart, and which she dared not avow.

"Have I the right to speak of ingratitude?" replied he. "Would it be just for me to punish when I have sinned?"

"Poor Rosina," said Bertha sighing. "Ah! why did I come to carry trouble and desolation into a dwelling where I received so much affection? Why did you love me, who could not love you? Can it be true what they said? Is Rosina drowned?"

"Yes," said he gloomily; "she threw herself into the lake by the side of the hacienda, the same upon which we three so often sailed."

"Good heavens!" murmured Bertha. "That passed after my departure? What drove the unfortunate girl to such an extremity?"

"When you arrived at the Hacienda of San Fernando," replied Steel-arm in a sad and mournful voice, "my marriage with Rosina had been already settled upon.

You know how pretty she was—I thought I loved her. How was it that when you arrived I loved you? Heaven alone knows. It certainly was not your fault, for you did all you could against it. Everybody loved you at the hacienda. As for me, I struggled in vain against my passion which became my life and my only thought. One evening, we three went into the forest, Rosina was on my arm. I gazed on you as you walked before us, and I drank in the air which carressed your features and your locks. Rosina, who saw my absence of mind, spoke of love, of marriage. Her voice chilled my heart? That day she began to doubt. Despite the coldness of your replies, the avoiding of me, I thought your eyes corresponded to mine, your heart beat with my own. Then it was that my poor mother fell sick, and after languishing for more than a month, she was called from earth. I found myself alone in the world. I returned to San Fernando. My first word was to ask where you were.

"Bertha's husband was not dead, as was believed," replied Rosina to me; 'He escaped the savages who captured him on the shipwreck of his vessel. Knowing that his wife was here, he came to seek her. Bertha has gone with him.'

"Gone?" cried I.

"Since fifteen days."

"For what place?"

"San Francisco. They will stay there but two or three days."

"Where go they, then?"

"To the placers."

"It seemed to me that my heart was torn from my breast. I know not what I answered Rosina, whose eyes filled with tears. I mounted my horse and rode to San Francisco. Eight days passed in useless searches.

"One evening, I found old Stefano, the steward of the hacienda, waiting at my hotel. He had a letter in Rosina's writing containing these words:

"Too weak to forget, too strong to complain, I die. May heaven pardon you, Pablo."

"She is dead!" said I.

"Yes," replied Stefano; 'we have not yet found the body of poor Nina, but Pepe, the vaquero, saw her on the banks of the great lake. Then we found in her chamber a note which announced her intention of killing herself, and praying her sister to send you the letter you have just read. Na (abbreviation of Donna) Rosina was the joy of the house. Be cursed, Don Pablo.'

"I wished to ask other questions, but he went away without a reply."

There was silence.

Steel-arm fixed upon the ground a sorrowful look.

Bertha wept.

Suddenly a footstep sounding from the corridor, made the poor woman tremble. She became pale as death.

"My husband!" exclaimed she in alarm.

It was a false alarm caused by some miner who left a neighboring chamber, and whose steps were soon lost in the distance.

"I do not want to cause you fresh inquietude," said Pablo. "Promise to do what I came to ask you, and I go. In quitting you forever, leave me the consolation that I have contributed to your happiness."

"Impossible, impossible! how can I explain to my husband this generosity and decide him to accept it?"

"Say it is the last present of a friend who is soon to die."

"That would be a falsehood," said she, making an effort to smile.

"The day you quit San Francisco, I go to the Sierra of Las Cosnivas."

"Do you not know," cried she "that

the Apaches have attacked travellers, there, pillaged their baggage, burned their wagons, killed the men, and taken away the women and children?"

"They say so here. Perhaps I may be in time to deliver some of the unfortunate captives."

"Or rather die with them."

"If heaven wills."

"This is folly."

"An expiation."

"Supposing you have committed some faults, should you wickedly lose your life? Some day you will be assassinated by one of those bandits whom you provoke, or devoured by wild beasts."

"I leave behind me no one whom my death will afflict."

"Your friends?"

"I am alone, I have none."

"You are unjust, Pablo. Under the surname of Steel-arm, I guessed you, I prayed for you, and I trembled at the foolish bravery which has rendered you so well known."

"Have you also guessed why I wander from mine to mine, succoring the diggers and others, shedding blood for them, asking in exchange for what I give them but one thing—The promise of defending in their turn, at the peril of their life, all females whom they may encounter in danger."

"Yes," murmured she, lowering her eyes to escape the burning look which she knew was upon her.

"Bertha," said Pablo tenderly. "Bertha," continued he, taking her hand.

She interrupted him with a gesture.

Some one was coming.

"This time it is he," cried she, "my God! have pity for me!"

On seeing the young woman's terror, Steel-arm darted to the door and bolted it.

"Open, or I will break the door in!" cried from outside, a voice broken with rage.

Pablo grasped his revolver, and placed himself before Bertha.

She pushed him away with the strength of despair.

"No," said she, "swear that whatever occurs, you will not use your weapons. Swear," repeated she seeing his hesitation, "or, by the living God, I plunge this knife into my heart."

"I swear," replied Steel-arm, after an instant's silence, broken only by the furious blows which Vandelles hailed upon the door.

He deposited upon the bed his dagger, his machete, and his revolver; then he retired to the farther part of the room.

"Now, may heaven protect us," murmured Bertha opening the door.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GOLD HUNTERS.

VANDELLES had already entered the hotel before Ribonne, breathless, had occupied half the road.

"Where are you going?" cried the servant as the Frenchman ran past him.

"Follow," replied Vandelles without stopping.

He had scarcely uttered the words than Joe Plum came out of a neighboring chamber.

At the sight of the Frenchman, he began to run before him.

The latter overtook the boy, pushed him into the first room he found open, shut the door, and turned the key upon him.

Then without heeding the cries of his prisoner, he retook his course to the chamber where, in the morning, he had left his wife sleeping.

He applied his ear to the keyhole, and distinguished the voices of two persons in animated conversation.

With one hand he drew his revolver, and with the other attempted to open the door; but the bolt prevented him.

As soon as Bertha opened the door, Vandelles, mad with fury, rushed into the apartment; he darted upon Steel-arm, who remained tranquilly seated, and pressed against his breast the barrels of his revolver.

Bertha uttered a scream and seized her husband's arm.

"You frighten your wife," said Pablo in his calm and gentle voice.

Swallowing his anger and jealousy Vandelles muttered a few words; then he pushed his wife so roughly that the poor woman fell upon the bed.

A flash of fury came from Pablo's eyes, and he made a movement to raise her.

"Move and you are dead!" cried Vandelles; "what came you here to do?"

"I am ready to reply to your questions," said Steel-arm; "but take away your revolver. The least movement and you will be an assassin," added he, showing to Vandelles his belt without a defensive weapon.

"Edward," cried Bertha, "let me explain."

"Why was the door shut?" interrupted Vandelles.

"Because I feared the first burst of your anger," answered Steel-arm. "You see I was right."

"Why did you remove your weapons?"

"I thought you would hesitate to murder a defenceless man."

"How came you here, and wherefore?" demanded the Frenchman, who, disconcerted by this strange calmness, let his revolver lower.

"But let you speak," and he turned to Bertha.

"I knew Mr. Verrars at the Hacienda of San Fernando," said the poor woman trembling. "He is a friend of the good family with whom I found, during your absence, such kind hospitality."

"Why did you not say so last night?"

"I was ignorant that he and Steel-arm were the same individual," replied Bertha, too pale and too much chilled with fear to allow the least blush to betray the falsehood she was forced to make.

"But the ring," continued Edward, all his anger returning at the remembrance of Ribonne's words, "this ring, which came, you said, from a friend of your mother, how is it that Steel-arm attaches such a price to it?"

"The ring belonged to my mother sir," returned Pablo.

"In short, what did you bring here?"

Pablo retook the letter which he had uselessly presented to Bertha, and gave it to Vandelles.

The latter opened it hurriedly, and looked rapidly upon the plan and the indications which it contained.

"The mine is rich!" cried he, dazzled with that feeling which can alone be comprehended by those who have passed a life in the mines.

"The richest I have ever encountered. One blow of my barreta knocked of a nugget of eleven pounds."

The eyes of Vandelles sparkled, but a species of shame was mingled with cupidity.

"That does not explain the nature of your presence," said he in an irritated tone.

"I never sell my placers, you know," replied Pablo. "Do you find anything extraordinary in a present to a friend of my mother, whom I meet amidst strangers?"

"We are unfortunate, yet we ask alms of no person," curtly answered Vandelles, in whose mind, pride, jealousy and thirst for gold was struggling.

"Did I not last night win all you possessed? I give you nothing, besides, for

it is a treasure which the first comer has a right to appropriate."

"And what ask you in exchange for this?" queried Vandelles ironically.

"Have you ever heard say that Steel-arm took pay for service?" retorted Pablo, in a tone as high as that of his interlocutor.

"Who is to be our guide?" inquired Vandelles, supposing doubtless that Steel-arm would propose himself.

"The plan and marks in the letter will suffice to conduct you."

"And you?"

"I? I go to the Mountains of Las Cosnivas."

"My wife and myself cannot alone undertake this journey, and, above all, accomplish the labor necessary to extract the gold."

"Join with two or three miners."

"Your friends?"

"Chose whom you will, only be prudent."

As these words were uttered, the door suddenly opened, and Ribonne rushed into the room.

"Well," demanded Vandelles, "what do you want?"

"I? nothing," stammered the Frenchman, stupified at the tranquil attitude of the two persons whom he thought to be fighting. "I thought—you ran so fast—I feared—good morning, Steel-arm," continued he to Pablo, glad to find a pretext not to reply to his countryman's questions.

While Steel-arm and Ribonne exchanged some words, Vandelles approaching Bertha, entered into conversation with her.

The husband and the wife were under the influence of different motives.

Dazzled by the yellow reflection of the nuggets which Steel-arm held sparkling before his mind's eye, Vandelles sought a pretext for his jealousy to be soothed, as well as reconcile his pride with his ardent desire to acquire a fortune which almost lay at his feet.

Bertha thought deeply of the love, so deep and devoted of Pablo, a love which the poor woman had shared in for so long a period.

She thought with anguish how, the next day, this noble and courageous man would go to a place where he was almost certain to meet death.

"Is there no means of saving him?" murmured Bertha in the depths of her heart, "can I not say we have need of him to guide and protect us?"

Vandelles soon became convinced that he had acted like a fool in the blindness of his jealousy.

Like the majority of men whose characters are at times feeble and violent, he passed from one extreme to another; but he had need of the minds of others to retake some coolness, and to seek to justify himself in his own eyes.

Though openly trying to make her husband refuse Steel-arm's offer, Bertha inwardly hoped he would not listen. She gave such feeble reasons in support of her words, that Vandelles, this resistance disarming him of his last suspicions, inclined more and more to accept the fortune which was offered to him.

"I will consult Ribonne," said he finally, yielding to the desire of justifying himself. "Can I speak of this to this gentleman?" said he to Steel-arm, pointing out the Frenchman to him.

"Without doubt," said Pablo. "The secret belongs to you henceforth; you can act as you please. In case you wish to avoid any difficulty, I authorize you to sell the claim."

"Can I find a purchaser?"

"With the plan which you have, and which I will confirm at need, you will find this evening fifty purchasers instead of one."

"How much is it worth?" demanded Vandelles.

"I know not, thirty or forty thousand dollars, perhaps."

"Must we wait for the spring to undertake the expedition?"

"No. The place is sheltered from rain. Then, as one of the veins is almost dust, chance, though it's hardly likely, might discover it to some gambusino."

"Our claim is before theirs!" cried Vandelles, who had already come to consider as his property the placer which he hesitated to accept. "Before all, Steel-arm," continued he, "I have some conditions to put—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Pablo, "if either of us may give conditions, it is I, not you; for I gave you the means of acquiring a fortune, and I ask nothing in exchange, not even your thanks. Farewell, gentlemen." He took his hat and saluted Bertha respectfully, while Ribonne, greatly puzzled, questioned Vandelles.

"You have renounced your foolish idea of departing for the sierra, have you not?" demanded Bertha of the young man, forcing a smile to conceal the inquietude she felt.

"Certainly not," responded he. "The emotion of danger and the satisfaction of rendering service will smother for a time the other thoughts which torture me. Heaven may perhaps permit me to rescue some one from the Apaches. I go to-morrow."

"If I have need of you?"

"Then I will stay."

"Well, do not go," murmured the poor woman.

"Wait, wait, Steel-arm," cried Ribonne, who listened with great animation to Vandelles' explanation. "Vandelles has told me all—we have a few questions to address you."

"In an hour I shall return to the hotel," said Pablo. "If you have anything to ask, you will find me there to speak to."

Then bowing again to Bertha, and saluting the two men with that glacial politeness which characterized him, he went away.

"What means your hesitation?" inquired Ribonne as Steel-arm closed the door.

"Come with me, and I will explain all," said Vandelles, taking his friend's arm and leading him to the wharf, where, with many variations, he recounted the scene our reader has just witnessed.

Notwithstanding the many deviations, Ribonne, calculating upon what had happened at breakfast, divined a great portion of what has already been recounted.

But, personal interest passing before all others, the perspective of the famous placer exercised its influence upon the Frenchman's mind. Stimulated by the hope of obtaining some of the immense wealth, he employed all his eloquence to prove to the other that his jealousy was absurd and that Steel-arm had no thought for Bertha.

Vandelles asked nothing better than to be convinced.

Ribonne attached great importance to the fact of obtaining Pablo to guide them on the expedition.

Here again, arguments were needed.

By force of reasoning and instances, Vandelles finally authorised him to beg Pablo to accompany them.

This last difficulty overcome, the two friends entered the hotel, building castles of great magnificence in the air with the thought of the treasure.

Ribonne charged himself to meet Pablo and entreat him to serve as guide.

"Wait for me in this chamber," said he to Vandelles. "I shall make the first openings in my name."

"Suppose I go with you?" observed Edward.

"Then we will be listened to by all the miners," said the other. "It will be

better, I think, to converse in your chamber, at least if you have not a new fit of your absurd jealousy."

"No," cried Vandelles; "my only fear is that Steel-arm is angry at my bearing."

"He? Ah, I'll bet he has forgot it already. Enter here, and, in five minutes, I will return with Pablo."

Vandelles had so much forgotten his jealousy that he even consented to his wife's remaining in the room, though she had manifested a contrary desire.

Ribonne returned with Steel-arm a few minutes after.

To the great disappointment of the Frenchman, Pablo appeared no ways disposed to serve as guide.

This almost formal refusal of Steel-arm, made the last suspicions of Vandelles vanish.

He insisted upon the American's acceptance, but the latter was immovable.

Bertha was seated at the bottom of the chamber, not venturing to look upon Pablo.

Twice or thrice her husband and Ribonne reproached her for not seconding their words, but each time, she had avoided a direct reply. When she saw Pablo about to leave, sad and resigned, when she thought that it was the last time she would see him, her voice joined those of Vandelles and Ribonne to pray Steel-arm to be their guide.

Fearing to consent too abruptly, Pablo dissimulated the joy he felt and still resisted.

Ribonne began the finest of his reasoning.

This time, success recompensed his eloquence, for Pablo relented.

Then came the different measures to adopt to ensure the accomplishment of the enterprise, and the number of persons to compose it.

This latter question was of great importance, and two hours passed in its discussion.

Evidently Vandelles and Ribonne would not suffice alone to extract the gold; but the junction of new associates, though doubling the chance of success, diminished each one's share.

After some considerable reflection, all decided upon Steel-arm's suggestion.

The secret of the placer belonged henceforth to Vandelles; the latter was to associate with him Ribonne, Cradle, Jose Guerino, and Mundiaz.

Vandelles was to reserve half of the proceeds for his share; the other half to be equally divided between the other four.

Besides, to ensure the co-operation of the latter, Pablo charged himself, once the first expedition was consummated, to indicate a new placer to the four miners, who were alone to receive its benefits.

It was agreed that the others should not be spoken to till two or three days before the departure when their interest would be stronger and there would be less likelihood of their indiscretion.

All was settled.

Pablo took leave of Mr. and Mrs. Vandelles, and went out with Ribonne.

In his joy, Ribonne, naturally familiar, let escape two or three words relative to Mrs. Vandelles, but he received such a cold and steel-like glance for reply, that he determined never to broach the subject again. As for Vandelles, something more than joy troubled him; it was the want of money to buy the indispensable articles of travel and to pay his hotel expenses. While he was uselessly cudgeling his brain to find a means to procure the money, chance, to which Pablo probably was not a stranger, came to the aid of Vandelles.

From some indiscretion, of which no one could discover the author, Paddy Shanty, the old friend of Ribonne, heard of the expedition.

He came to Vandelles and begged him

to permit his entering the association.

Upon the Frenchman's refusal, he offered a thousand dollars in exchange for the favor he solicited.

This proposition came so opportunely to obviate the last difficulty of Vandelles, that he accepted the Irishman's offer with Steel-arm's consent.

Vandelles received the thousand dollars and the same evening Shanty, with his future associates, held a secret meeting in the Frenchman's room.

The great portion reserved for Vandelles, made many sighs of envy arise from the other miners.

They nevertheless eagerly accepted the conditions when Steel-arm, whose word was an oracle to them, guaranteed that it would be to their advantage.

The promise of a second placer, to be equally divided between the five associates of Vandelles, in case they were not satisfied with the result of the first expedition, did away with all further hesitation.

The association was definitely composed of the following persons: Vandelles and his wife, Cradle, Shanty, Ribonne, Mundiaz and Jose Guerino.

Every one swore secrecy upon the organization and the design of the enterprise.

They were to start on Monday of the week following, thus leaving five days for the miners to make their preparations, etc.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE START.

As generally occurs in like circumstances, the preparations for departure took more time than they had supposed.

The placer being in a far-off region, in the proximity of which they would encounter no PUEBLO (village) nor RANCHERIA (cluster of farms) the travellers were obliged to carry, besides the tents and necessary tools, sufficient provisions for three or four months. Though appearing no ways to meddle with the divers details, Pablo was secretly occupied with great activity. He watched over the worthy Irishman, whose good qualities he took pleasure in developing. Paddy Shanty became the purveyor, the factotum of the expedition.

Ribonne christened him the head steward.

Jose seconded him with all his power in spite of some attacks of the fever, which now became less frequent.

The implements of mining regarded Cradle; Vandelles and Mundiaz, who formerly had been a vaquero (herdsman) were occupied in selecting horses and mules.

Ribonne, though charged with the provision department, shifted all the labor upon the shoulders of Jose and Shanty.

When all the preparatives were nearly terminated, Steel-arm quitted San Francisco to scout along the road, and to lead every one to believe that he had gone upon one of his expeditions.

He returned secretly to the city three days after.

The union of the future associates was to be in a place situated two miles from San Francisco.

It was also decided that they were to leave the following night a little before sunset.

Pablo fixed, a few miles from the city, a new meeting-place where his companions were to rejoin him by two different routes.

"If we leave together," said he to them, "this coincidence might lead to suspicions of the truth and other miners will follow our traces. Two roads lead

to the place which I come to indicate to you; Mr. and Mrs. Vandelles, Shanty and Jose follow the easier one along the river; Cradle, Mundiaz and Ribonne will proceed by the pine forest, and move a little quicker to arrive at the same time at the penon (hill) of Juanito. To make our departures excite less attention, Ribonne, Mundiaz, and Cradle will change their hotel and lodge at the other end of the city."

After having clearly indicated each one's route they were to follow the next day, he took leave of his future companions, keeping with him but Cradle and Shanty.

He entered the city with the latter, where he examined the purchases with minute care.

Then, leaving Cradle occupied in dividing into packs, to be carried on the mules, the cradles, pans, pick-axes, hatchets, spades, shovels, and other instruments for the extraction of gold, he with Shanty departed for a gunsmith's.

"You know how to manage a gun?" inquired Steel-arm of the Irishman.

"Of course I do. Before I left ould Ireland, may blessings be upon her, I was a bit of a poacher. I kilt more pheasants and partridges than Mundiaz and Cradle caught trouts in their life."

While listening to Paddy Shanty, whose face was animated by recollections of his youthful sports, Pablo attentively examined the arms which the store contained.

Having tried many others, he at last laid on one side a Colt's revolver, a double-barrelled Manton, a bowie-knife and a dagger with a blade eight or nine inches long.

For these were asked the enormous sum of eight hundred dollars, which he paid without a murmur, on condition that the barrels of the revolver and of the gun should be unscrewed and carefully examined under his eyes.

They hastened to obey him.

"Take these arms, Shanty," said Pablo to the Irishman, "I bought them for you. Yes, I give them to you," added he, seeing that Paddy, in stupefaction, stood with open mouth and staring eyes.

Precious in all countries, a good weapon is an invaluable treasure in California, where a life often depends upon the good state of one's arms.

"All? the gun, revolver, bowie-knife, and dagger for me, for Paddy Shanty?" said the Irishman, who still doubted the reality of his good fortune.

"Yes," replied Pablo, giving him beside a sort of leathern case filled with ammunition.

Shanty stammered a few words of thanks; then, giving vent to his joy, he sang Paddy Carey, in a stentorian voice which shook the windows of the shop, which act in any other city than San Francisco would certainly have astonished the passers-by.

Steel-arm, who had also bought a Mexican dagger and a revolver, the smallest and lightest he could find, made a sign to the Irishman.

"Come, come," said he to Shanty who could not cease playing with his gun and revolver with a childish satisfaction.

They left the store.

"I never was so glad as I am to-day," cried Shanty, "how can I repay you, Steel-arm?"

"I will tell you," said Pablo. "The lady who is going with us is an old friend of mine. I know you are a brave lad, so I wish you to watch over her during the expedition. Whatever may arrive never leave her. If heaven permits the poor woman to return in safety to San Francisco, I shall leave you all my fortune, and you know Steel-arm never broke his word to friend or foe."

"By St. Patrick!" cried the honest Irishman, "I don't want any promise for

that, Steel-arm. The poor creature interests me already. Since you say you're a friend of hers, I swear that I will protect her as if she was my own daughter."

"Well," replied Steel-arm, "I reckon upon you. One word more. Speak to no one, much less to Madame Vandelles of what I have just said."

Shanty promised.

He shook Pablo's hand heartily, and returned to the city, whistling or singing all the Irish airs he could recollect, and aiming at every mule, horse, or bird, the butt-end of his gun.

He was so gleeful at the possession of the fine weapons and at the confidence Steel-arm had reposed in him, that for many hours he could not sleep.

He awoke three hours before daybreak, and went to Vandelles, whom he found terminating the preparations.

The three miners silently descended, and went through the door opened by Master Joe, who the evening before had been made acquainted with their project of departure.

When they had gone about a hundred paces from the last houses, or rather the last tents of the city, Vandelles whistled in a peculiar manner.

Another whistle responded, heralding Jose Guerino, who soon appeared.

He was mounted and led three horses by the bridles.

"Cradle, Mundiaz, and Ribonne have already gone," said he to Vandelles. "They have taken the two mules with baggage. Though their route is longer than ours, they will arrive first at the rendezvous, and will have the fire lit and the supper ready."

"And better luck still, the rain has stopped," said Shanty, more occupied concerning his new weapons than himself.

When questioned by Vandelles, the Mexican and the Irishman commenced to recount a series of marvelous adventures of which Steel-arm was the hero, and in which true and false stories were intermingled, as almost always happens in such cases.

Vandelles and his wife listened with an interest easy to comprehend.

Thanks to that natural and instinctive coquetry which is given to the most modest female, the least desirous to please, Bertha had found means of converting into something elegant and graceful her clothing of coarse stuffs.

A felt hat with wide brim, protected her face from sun or rain. Her fine black hair fell upon her Amazonian corsage of brown cloth, a petticoat of the same cloth came down to the boots of Cordovan leather.

Although this simple costume was not graceful in itself, yet it admirably became Bertha.

Her face beamed with that indefinable beauty which touches the heart so deeply. When she was near Steel-arm, she dared not look upon him, and the emotion she felt was somewhat mingled with sadness.

Far from him, on the contrary, she allowed her imagination to recall that noble heart which she knew beat for her.

A thousand little details which the heart of a lover alone could think of, and which the heart of the woman loved alone can divine, came at each instant to remind Bertha of Pablo's attentive solicitude.

Vandelles was, as we have said, appointed to buy the horses.

He had met with great success in his purchases.

The mare which Bertha was mounted upon, offered nothing remarkable at first sight, of beauty of form; but her step was so light, her mouth so tender, and her obedience so complete, that Bertha, after riding a mile or two, immediately had the idea that Pablo was concerned

in the acquisition of a steed so perfect.

"Truly," said she to Shanty, who, faithful to his mission, kept near her, "my husband has been fortunate in his purchases. This is well worth the sixty dollars he paid."

A smile brightened honest Pat's features, which Bertha observed. It was he, in fact, who had bribed a horse-dealer to sell to Vandelles this mare at the price of a hundred dollars.

Pablo had bought the animal for three hundred piastres, an unheard-of price in California, of a ranchero's wife.

The Irishman's smile sufficed to change to certainty the suspicions of Bertha.

She gently patted the mane of Rita, as the animal was named, whose precious qualities were enhanced in the young woman's eyes.

On arriving at the rendezvous, Bertha found her future companions installed within the ruins of an old abandoned posado, completing the preparations for supper.

"Have you seen Steel-arm?" inquired Vandelles.

"Yes," replied Mundiaz; "we await him here. He has gone ahead to see if the horses can pass the ford of Paletuviers, or whether we will have to make a turn through the wood. He promised to return before sunrise. It was he who gave us these four fine trouts, which Cradle has already cooked."

Some blankets were hung from the great rocks, sheltering them from the wind, and they supped joyously under this improvised shelter.

With the exception of Vandelles, and perhaps Cradle and Ribonne, all the miners were of a common sort, with manners naturally rough but honest.

Such was the effect of the young woman's presence, that each one sought to do something for her, and Cradle interrupted his repast many times to arrange the fire, for fear that the "little lady" might be cold.

The simple attentions of these men, so rude amongst themselves, touched almost to tears Mrs. Vandelles.

When the hour for repose had arrived, the miners abandoned to Vandelles and his wife the least dilapidated portion of the posado.

The Irishman and Mundiaz were to act as sentinels.

At the moment when the Irishman relieved the latter, and was lighting his pipe from a brand of the fire, he heard in a neighboring thicket a firm step which he immediately recognized for that of Steel-arm.

The Californian, indeed, appeared an instant after within the red circle formed by the blaze of the fire and seated himself by the side of Paddy, who informed him of all that had happened since his leaving San Francisco.

Some hours after, by the first rays of the sun, the miners finished a breakfast of cold mutton and tea, rolled up their blankets, attached them to the saddle-bow, and took their course in the direction of Feather River.

The first miles were accomplished with little fatigue; but, as they proceeded along the banks of the Sacramento, the route became more difficult.

The steep hills overgrown with trees and shrubs of every species, obliged them to make many long turns. In other places, and principally the valleys, the soil, worked down by the rain and many little rivers, resembled a lake of mud.

The poor horses sank almost to the belly.

Sometimes they were forced to completely leave the borders of the stream and make a path through the trackless woods in the midst of gigantic trees and a dense matting of creeping plants and prickly shrubs.

Steel-arm marched always in advance,

a little distance from his companions to whom he pointed out the road, by means of the various objects noted by hunters.

Sometimes it was by branches broken and turned in the direction they were to follow; at others, stakes of wood planted in the earth in the midst of an interminable prairie, or a few chops of an axe (blazes) upon some tree remarkable for its dimension, or its isolated position.

The two Mexicans and Shanty, habituated to life in the woods, quickly comprehended their guide's hieroglyphics, and the little troop moved boldly forward conforming to Pablo's directions.

When Steel-arm came to some place well adapted for a night's encampment, he lit a great fire, while his companions roasted the game which they had shot upon the journey.

Grouse, partridge, quails, wood pigeons or ring-doves, rabbits, wild ducks, sometimes a quarter of a buck or deer, offered a grateful repast to travellers wearied and sick of San Francisco fare.

At other times, while the horses and mules were unsaddled, Pablo would take a fishing-line and go away with Cradle and Mundiaz.

The three would not be slow in returning with some fish, chiefly magnificent salmon trout.

When the game was done to a turn, and the fish nicely broiled, a sumptuous meal was despatched with an enormous quantity of rum and brandy.

The repast terminated, some time was passed in smoking and telling tales of the diggings by Cradle or Mundiaz.

But the travellers were generally too fatigued for long conversations.

When all was ready for the night, a tent was raised for Vandelles and his wife, upon the place where the fire had been made.

According to the state of the weather the men raised another tent, or simply rolling themselves up in their blankets, slumbered, with a saddle for a pillow, and their feet to the coals of the fire.

At daybreak, the miner on guard awoke his comrades.

Each made his toilet at a neighboring rivulet, and took his share of breakfast of cold meat and tea.

Then the tents were pulled down and packed on the mules with the other baggage, and the troop followed Steel-arm's guidance.

This expedition was entirely different from those of men prospecting.

But Steel-arm wished to avoid the least fatigue to Bertha, who, already inured to life at the placers in her former trip with her husband, could better understand the ingenious and constant solicitude of Pablo.

It truly seemed as if he must have a body, as well as arm, of steel, to withstand the fatigues which he imposed upon himself.

Sleeping but little, always marching on foot, he still found means to go for several miles in the pursuit of game, already less abundant at this epoch than when previous to the discovery of the gold mines.

Profoundly touched by this devotion, but grieved to see Pablo undergo such fatigue, Bertha many times attempted to stop this state of affairs.

But Steel-arm would reply with a sad and mournful smile, which for a moment would animate his features.

Then the next day he would recommence the same exposure to fatigue.

Bertha had left San Francisco much frightened at the long journey she was to make with the young man whom she loved so passionately, and who also loved her.

She had promised herself to appear cold and frigid to Pablo, and to check by severity, the first word of love he should dare to avow.

But by Steel-arm's reserve all her precautions were rendered useless.

The two first days, Mrs. Vandelles was deeply moved with the respect and delicacy of the young man.

After satisfaction, came astonishment, then impatience, next reasonings, the most contradictory and absurd.

At the end of the first week, she was seriously afflicted at this persistence, and became persuaded that Pablo had some hidden motive in shunning her.

Bertha was energetic and patient against suffering and misfortune, but she could not, for a long time, support anxiety and incertitude.

One evening she found herself for a few minutes alone with Pablo. She asked him, with a smile, why he obstinately persisted in never remaining with his companions.

As Steel-arm was about to reply, Vandelles approached, and familiarly passed his arm around Bertha's waist.

A shudder, imperceptible for other eyes than a female's, passed across Pablo's features.

He took his rifle from where it hung on the branches of a mezquite (arbor Chibou), and went silently away.

"Ah!" said Vandelles, following him with his eyes, "if he can shoot some pheasants like those last night—they will be a famous addition to the supper."

Bertha sighed and made some reply, though she knew not what it was.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GOLIATHS.

ALTHOUGH the gold-seekers had stopped some time before sunset, to have more repose, as the next day they were to ascend the rugged declivity of the Rinalto, night had for an hour past covered the valley, before Steelarm finally appeared in the midst of his companions, who were already disposing themselves for sleep.

He carried upon his shoulder a deformed and bloody hunch covered with a black skin.

"Blast my eyes!" cried Cradle, "it is a buffalo hump! what a fine *totemada* we can prepare."

"And to-morrow," said Jose Guerino, "our 'little lady' shall have such a breakfast as she never before tasted. To work, Ribonne."

The Frenchman, extended upon a blanket by the fire, rose slowly, and came to help Shanty and Jose.

The latter dug in the earth with his knife, a hole three feet deep and the same in width.

"Come with me, Vandelles," said Mundiaz, "we will bring some wood."

The two went away, while Ribonne approached the others, from whom he demanded so many explanations, and recounted such anecdotes of the chase and the kitchen, that the work was finished without his scarcely lifting a hand.

Paddy did not notice the Frenchman's laziness, but Jose liked to be helped in his work, as he, like most Mexicans, did not fancy labor.

"Ribonne," cried he, "speak less and work more."

While the miners filled the hole with branches of trees, Cradle, knife in hand, prepared the buffalo hump, and cut up the aromatic herbs brought by Steel arm.

"You killed the buffalo at the first shot?" inquired he of Pablo, who was seated upon the trunk of a tree a few paces from him.

"What did you hear?" inquired the Californian.

"Caspita! we heard one shot. Were there many other buffaloes?"

"Two or three hundred."

"It is very strange that this one fell upon the first shot. Buffaloes have long lives! Stay, you are wounded, Steel-arm."

"It is nothing," replied the Californian, wrapping around his left arm the folds of his zarape. "I was forced to use my machete to finish him, and his horns entered my arm."

"Why the devil did you not reload your rifle, or use your pistols?"

"I felt like using the steel!" said Pablo whose accent chilled Cradle to his marrow.

Seated a few steps off, Bertha followed with her eyes all of Pablo's movements.

At the motion which he made to gather up his blanket the young woman remarked the blood which covered the Californian's arm.

"You are wounded, Pablo?" cried she running to him, pale and trembling.

"A scratch," responded Steel-arm.

"Let me see," continued she.

"It is nothing," said he again, pulling away his arm in a manner somewhat rude.

Bertha's heart was already full, and this last act brought tears to her eyes.

"I beg your pardon," muttered Steel-arm, "but, if you knew what I have suffered."

"Then let me see the wound," said the young woman, smiling through her tears and pretending to misunderstand Pablo's words.

Steel-arm this time abandoned his left arm, deeply torn with the buffalo horns.

The young woman applied to the wound a bandage of oregano leaves bruised between two stones.

"Why did you quit us so abruptly this afternoon?" inquired she. "We had no need of more provisions. I cannot understand what pleasure you find in exposing your life."

He lowered his head without answer.

"Pablo," said Bertha, "speak to me frankly. In what have I offended you? what have you against me?"

The young woman's tears, which she could not repress, stopped the utterance of her words.

"Bertha!" cried the Californian moved by this sorrow, "Bertha!"

Then, retaining by an effort the confession which nearly escaped him, he added in a stifling voice: "If I had remained one second more this afternoon, I should have killed Vandelles."

"Ah!" said she with one of those inflections of the voice which nothing can define.

"Listen," said he, "I love you and you do not love me. When I am near you, when I hear the sound of your voice, when your eyes encounter mine, I feel my reason, my senses, and the reserve which I imposed upon myself, vanish. At the moment when your fortune and your life, as well as those of your husband, depend upon me, to speak to you of love would be cowardly. If you cannot love me, I wish you to at least esteem me; I wish you to have a good recollection of poor Pablo, when, thanks to him, you return rich and happy to your country—do you understand why?"

"Well, Bertha, did you come to see how a *totemada* is made?" broke in Vandelles, approaching.

Bertha let Pablo's hand fall, and tremblingly followed her husband without daring to look at the Californian, for fear that the latter should see in her eyes the avowal which her heart kept murmuring lowly.

Steel-arm would, if it was any other woman than Bertha, have discovered if her heart beat in reply to his.

The exaltation and sincerity of his passion blinded his sight and forbade his reading Bertha's heart.

If sometimes a hope crossed his mind he

repulsed it instantly and fell again into his sorrowful gloom.

This day, above all, Bertha's profound emotion struck his attention and spread before him an horizon of happiness.

"Oli heaven, does she love me!" muttered he following her with her eyes.

When near the group of miners, she could not resist turning to throw upon the Californian a furtive regard.

The eyes of the two met and both started.

"What is it?" inquired Vandelles of his wife as he felt her arm tremble in his own.

"Nothing, I am cold," replied she.

"Then, come to the fire," said he, with two steps reaching the pit of which we have spoken, and which was filled already with ardent flames and surmounted by great stones which fell to the bottom of the pit at the same time as the flaming branches which they had upheld.

When this primitive oven was sufficiently warm, they placed upon the red-hot stones the buffalo hump wrapped within the skin with herbs.

They spread above it a bed of hot cinders, then charcoal and covered all with green branches, the interstices being filled up with earth.

This operation terminated, the miners left to the night the accomplishment of the cookery of the delicate mess which Cradle and the others had been engaged with.

The following morning, at the moment of disinterring the totemada, the miners sought Pablo to supplicate him to remain to take his share.

To their great disappointment, Steel-arm, faithful to his habits, had already gone to continue his painful duty of scout.

His father's death, the more recent one of his mother, the sudden disappearance of Bertha, the deplorable end of Rosina, finally the perils of his adventurous life, and his sad and isolated existence, had contributed to develop in Pablo a natural melancholy.

With less love for Madam Vandelles, he would long ago have discovered the place he occupied in the young woman's heart; but, as the fever prevents the sick man from appreciating the state of surrounding objects, so Steel-arm's ardent passion troubled his moral faculties and rent from him all his rectitude, all his clearness of judgment.

Being loved by Bertha seemed to him so far beyond human felicity, that his mind refused to believe what his heart depicted.

"Bertha loves me not," said he as he strode over the stumps and rocks, "no! she is good and does not like to see me suffer; that is all. If she were again rich and happy and single, I might speak of love but now—besides—"

While his mind sought to smother the faint glimmer of hope which now and then rose from his heart, his travelling companions finished the preparations for their breakfast.

The buffalo hump was brought from the cinders in such a state of carbonization that Vandelles and Ribonne cried out that it was good for nothing but to be thrown away.

"You know nothing," said Cradle. "You will see presently."

The American pulled off the black and charred skin, under which appeared a red and savory flesh.

Suddenly two gunshots were fired from behind the trees.

One ball went through the hat of Vandelles; the other struck Jose lightly on the shoulder, wounding him but little.

The miners, grasping their rifles, darted in the direction of the assailants.

The first movement of Shanty was to follow his friends; but, remembering Pablo's words, he retraced his steps and re-

mained standing by the side of the young woman.

About an hour after, the miners returned without finding any thing, save the tracks of broad shoes evidently indicating white men.

Vandelles had gone so far that he became lost in the inextricable labyrinth of vegetation.

Perhaps he would never have been found by his companions, if Shanty, noticing his absence, had not taken the precaution to fire from time to time shots to indicate the position of the encampment.

Almost at the same instant, Steel-arm arrived, his first thought being for Bertha.

"What has happened?" asked he of the Irishman.

"Some one fired upon us, and one bullet struck my hat," replied Vandelles fixing upon Steel-arm a suspicious look.

Pablo responded with a glance so calm and transparent that Vandelles blushed at his evil thought.

He hastened to recount to Steel-arm, all the details of the aggression.

The latter heard all without a word.

Then he went to examine the foot-prints which Mundiaz had found where the shots had come from.

"They are those of the Goliaths," said Steel-arm finishing his inspection.

"So you have seen the Goliaths' feet?" demanded Cradle.

"At the Star Hotel only; but it is easy to recognize the foot-prints of Tom."

"How the deuce do they know our road?" asked Ribonne.

"I greatly fear that they follow us and have the same end to their expedition as ourselves."

"How?" cried Vandelle. "Do they know the placer?"

"I do not think they precisely know where the mine is situated; but they have some clue to its existence. The placer was revealed to me by a poor devil of a Mexican whom I found, at the bottom of a ravine, just expiring. While I bent over the unfortunate man to force him to swallow some rum, he pointed his finger to a neighboring hill, stammering some unintelligible words. The rum restored him a little strength, and he told me that on the day before, two miles from the place I found him, he had discovered indications of a vein of gold. He hastened to get his tools at the place where he had left his tent under the guard of his partner. While he was relating to the latter his discovery, two robbers fired upon them. Juanito's comrade lay dead. Juanito, though wounded, tried to escape but, in flying, he received a second bullet. Dizzy with loss of blood and the rapidity of his course, he had fallen down the hill upon the rocks. He expired ten minutes after our meeting."

"Well!" said Ribonne, "I see nothing in all this to reveal to the robbers of whom you speak the existence of the placer."

"The nuggets found by Juanito had remained in his comrade's hands, and consequently fell into the power of the salteadores (thieves). The latter, having the nuggets, arrived at the same conclusions."

"But why did they not remain in that place?"

"Perhaps they were not successful in their search," observed Mundiaz; "then they lacked provisions and tools. Besides, if it was the Goliaths who shot at us, they may have spent all their money in Sacramento or San Francisco."

"I have no certainty in that respect," said Pablo; "I cannot tell why I suspect the Goliaths. See if you can find the bullets."

"Here is mine," said Jose, who, unrolling a little packet, took from it a large ball.

Pablo took from his pouch a little sack containing two bullets which he placed by the side of the one which Jose Guerino had given.

"Who of you," demanded Pablo, "remarked the guns of the two Goliaths and can tell me if their rifles are of the same bore?"

"Philip's rifle is the smaller," replied Shanty; "Tom's carries about eight balls to the pound."

"Then the ball which struck Jose came probably from Philip's gun, — and this also," added he, pointing to one of the bullets he had taken from his pouch; "they are exactly alike. As for this other ball which I took from poor Juanito's body, this large one, it must have come from Tom's rifle. See if you can find the second ball. Vandelles, I am sure Tom fired upon you."

Every one went to work for the search, but the bullet was lost in the wood.

It was impossible to find it.

"Is this unlucky incident to stop us continuing our route?" asked Cradle.

"Certainly not," cried the others.

"It will only make us take more precaution hereafter," said Steel-arm, "and to never separate one from another. Two of us will march ahead of the others to clear the road. At night we will mount guard by turn. Then at evening I warn everyone from going within the light from the fire more than necessary."

From this moment the travellers never advanced without the greatest precaution.

In the prairies, they went boldly, as the sight can cover a great distance; but in forests and defiles, everyone dismounted and proceeded forward, making a defence of their horses.

Mundiaz, Shanty, Cradle, and Jose, more habituated than the Frenchmen to forest life, were turn by turn scouts. Their skilled eyes questioned with the minutest attention the earth, the lower branches of trees, sticks, stones, leaves, and many other objects which less experienced men would have passed without a thought.

A broken reed, a plant bruised by the passage of a deer or a coyote became a subject of scrupulous examination.

In the midst of all these inquietudes, Bertha experienced a secret sentiment of joy in thinking that henceforth Pablo would be forced to remain near her for her protection.

Her hope was deceived.

Pablo appeared only at breakfast.

This absence seemed the more extraordinary to the young woman, from never, perhaps, Steel-arm's protection being so necessary to the gold-hunters.

They were entering a narrow defile, bordered by two hills covered with thick undergrowths and thickets.

The ground, softened by the rain, sank each instant beneath the travellers feet. They were obliged to sound the pools of muddy water with long poles before advancing.

Mundiaz and Ribonne were in front as scouts.

Cradle and Vandelles, with their rifles ready cocked, were a few paces in the rear.

Suddenly the Irishman, who faithful to his word, kept by Bertha's side, fancied he heard about fifty paces on the right a crackling of twigs.

He quietly passed the bridle of his horse over his arm, that he might have the use of both hands; then he fixed his eyes upon an almost imperceptible movement amid the bushes.

Vandelles, who had been scrutinising on all sides, finally remarked the Irishman's preoccupation.

The direction of the latter's eyes denoted to him the movement of some strange body in the thicket.

With his ordinary impetuosity, Vandelles rushed to the place. Profiting by a moment when the agitation of the branches indicated in a more precise manner the position of the unknown enemy, he shouldered his rifle and fired.

Amidst the crashing of dried branches came a frightful growl which made the most intrepid turn pale.

"Blast your eyes!" cried Cradle, "you have brought a grizzly down on us!"

As he uttered these words, a grizzly bear thrust its enormous head above a tuft of cactus, and ran upon the gold-seekers, making his jaws clash with such violence that they might have been heard more than fifty paces from him.

What made the position of the miners more critical was the terror of the horses. They kicked, snorted and sought by every means to break their bridles and fly.

Obliged to employ all their strength to restrain their frightened steeds, the miners could not use their weapons against the terrible animal which rapidly approached.

It was already within thirty paces of the men when Ribonne sent a bullet which, though it struck the beast in the breast, but accelerated its progress.

Shanty levelled his gun in his turn with more coolness; but at the moment when he pressed the trigger, Bertha's mare, whose bridle he had passed around his arm, leaped quickly upon one side, with a start so abrupt and violent that she broke the reins.

Then turning to the left, in the direction of the torrent, she galloped away, notwithstanding Shanty's efforts, he having re-seized the broken halter, and let himself be dragged over the stones.

A moment irresolute, the bear turned half around and directed his course in the same direction.

Vandelles rushed to stop the animal.

Jose though feeble and wounded threw himself resolutely before the grizzly who was almost upon him.

The bear growled savagely, with a stroke of its huge paw, tore Jose's gun from his hands, broke it, and continued its course without minding the bullets of the miners.

Only ten paces separated him from the mare that had stopped.

Bertha, pale and mute, had seized the revolver which Pablo had given her, and waited bravely the almost inevitable death which menaced her.

"Pablo will regret that he was not here," said the poor woman, with that preoccupation of the object of love which never abandons certain women even in the most terrible circumstances.

Too distant to stop the bear, Cradle, Vandelles, and Mundiaz hastened to shoot; but their bullets like that of Jose, merely added to the terrific fury of the grizzly, whose breath already reached Bertha.

Suddenly a shot came from the other side of the torrent, striking the bear between ear and eye.

The animal growled painfully, and stopped a second, astonished at the shot.

At the same instant, a second ball struck it behind the shoulder. Then a man leaped the torrent with a bound, and came between the bear and Bertha, who was almost fainting.

"Pablo!" cried the miners with one voice.

Then was silence.

The bear threw itself upon Steel-arm. Shanty ran to Pablo's aid.

"Attend to Madame Vandelles," snouted the Californian in a voice which he dared not disobey.

Gathering up his forces, Pablo thrust his broad dagger into the bear's belly, the latter having thrown his gigantic paws around the young man's neck.

All at once, while Pablo was being hugged in the grizzly's dying clasp, while Vandelles, Cradle and Mundiaz were gathered close to them, and endeavoring to lend their aid, while the alarmed horses were neighing, whinnying, rearing and tugging at their fastenings, and while the hesitating Irishman turned his head to look again at Pablo, a faint, smothered scream came to Shanty's ear and looking in the direction, he just saw two men rush with Madame Vandelles into the thicket beside the road.

He gave a whoop and levelled his gun, but the group was gone.

His friends turned, but at the same moment a groan from the Californian made them attend to him.

The dying grizzly was squeezing him in a fearful manner, although the broad blade was buried in his belly.

Then Cradle whipped out his knife and plunged it into the beast's eye, while Jose pulled at the stiffening claws to unloose them.

Pablo was rescued, but in a hardly living condition.

He rolled his eyes around as if to assure himself of Bertha's fate, but a glaze came before his sight, and with a faint sigh, he fell on the earth, close to his huge antagonist.

Vandelles, who might now look around, instantly noticed the disappearance of his wife and of the Irishman.

The latter, however, presently appeared, crashing through the woods.

"They're to horse—and gone!" gasped he breathlessly, leaning on his rifle.

"Who—Bertha?" exclaimed Vandelles.

"The villains—two of them—didn't you see! They took the 'little lady,' and now they are—Lord knows where! miles away."

And while Cradle and Mundiaz lavished attention on the senseless Pablo, the worthy Irishman gave an account of Bertha's spiriting away.

When he dashed into the forest after the two who had seized on Madame Vandelles, he had been close at their heels, but, tripping over a creeper while on his run, he had dropped his gun, and, while picking it up, had heard the quick beat of horses' hoofs.

When he reached the spot where this sound had arisen, which was a little clearing, he found evidence of some hours' stay having been made there by two men, for at the foot of two trees were spots of ploughed-up ground, with a heap of wild peas, which denoted that horses had been there tied up, and impatiently pawed the ground.

All chance of overtaking the abductors was over for the night, but Vandelles was only quieted on the assurances of Jose and Shanty that, when Pablo recovered, which could not be long, he would take up the trail and restore Mrs. Vandelles, an easy task to him, the foremost "trailer" in all of the Dorado.

CHAPTER X.

THE OTHER PARTY.

A DAY'S ride from the spot where the first party of gold-seekers encamped for the night, was the stopping-place of another party of six men and two females, equipped for a journey.

It was the night previous to Bertha's abduction.

A faint breath of air, the herald of the night breeze, stole along by the roots of the towering giant trees, kissing the pretty wild-flowers till they rose up blushing.

The wild beasts, which on stormy nights, grovel like hares before the

lashing rain and blinding light, and, fearfully howling, hide in hollows of the earth, now were skulking about for their prey.

This was not the season when the newly created torrents dash at and over-leap rocky barriers and, with a roar of delight at their freedom, rush down the mountain side, with massive trunks of trees balanced amid the foam upon them, crushing boulders like dried twigs, bursting beaver dams as it would a wall of leaves, grinding rock against rock till the precious metal, shining with clear yellow in the lightning's broad sheet, falls out to be received in the river it speeds to, a faint tribute indeed, to the bed of sand, as golden as that of the Lydian stream which the King Midas washed his wish away in.

In a natural clearing smouldered a low fire, just sufficient to keep off the chill, and blazing up now and then, as drops of fat fell from some half-dozen quails, stretched on the wood.

But two of the party were Americans, and they, by their uncommon size, and height, would have been quickly recognized by any who knew them, as the two Goliaths, whose acquaintance the reader made at San Francisco, and whose acquaintance Vandelles and Jose came very nearly making (by way of the bullets, as Pablo had guessed).

They were "sprawled out," (no other word will do) on the grass, with their feet to the fire, along with two or three half-breeds, while a man was to be seen with his head inside a coarse tent pitched on the border of the wood, near a half-dozen hobbled horses.

"Well, Ramon," all at once said Tom Smithson, as he finished the manufacture of a rude wooden fork with his bowie, and addressing his neighbor, a native Californian, whose peculiar tint and hair, proved him to possess some Indian blood, "well, Ramon, so you say the other party (and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder) are all a foot. Blast it," exclaimed he, opening his powder flask, and examining the grains, "I don't see how the devil I came to miss the frog-eater. Dupont's powder never failed me before."

"I s'pose your powder got damp, Tom," observed his brother, turning over on his side, "but I had better luck—I swear I hit the greaser?"

"Yes, so you did," broke in the man styled Ramon, "the Mexican got his shoulder scratched. He had a rag around it, when I last saw him."

"How do the party look?" inquired Tom, who seemed of quite a conversational mood. "Pretty well gi'n out?"

"Well, there's Steel-arm, he's no fellow to get tired. The Yankee and the Frenchman are stout enough. The Patlander is good to go. The other Frenchman and his woman will keep up with the rest, I'm sure."

"Umph!" growled Tom, "devil take me if I know how to do it. Say, Phil, how can we get that set to turn back, or at least give them a couple of days' delay?"

Phil fell to thinking.

"Well, Ramon," inquired he at last, "do they think much of the woman?"

"How do I know?" returned the half-breed, who perhaps did not think the question bore at all on the case.

"No, no, s'pose something happened, say the woman gets lost in the woods, eh?"

"No fear of that," rejoined Ramon, "they keep too close an eye on her."

"Humph!" coughed Philip, leering at his brother, "maybe she might be induced to leave the party."

"Yes," chimed in Tom, eagerly, "a couple of safe hands might induce her to go with them, with a blanket over her

head in case she is fond of singing loud." "Here, Benito!" called out Philip Smithson, sitting up. The man whose head was inside the tent, started.

"Here, come here!" went on Philip.

The man came forward to the fire.

Like his companions he was dressed for a journey, with loose Mexican jacket, laced breeches coming down to the knee, and hide leggings. His spurs were of silver, and a band of the same metal ran round his hat.

He was a native of California like the other three.

"Benito," began Tom, waving him to sit down near him, "I've got a plan, one of Phil's invention. You know we have not been able to delay Steel-arm's party."

"That is so," answered Benito.

"Phil thinks—and I am with him—that, if we wipe out the woman, it will help us nicely."

"No woman killing!" exclaimed his hearer.

"Oh, bah! she needn't be killed. All we want is to kinder lose her in the woods, and while Steel-arm's friends are seeking her, we can be at the mine, digging away, and loading our saddle-bags."

"Provided the Indians let us do it," cried Benito, ominously.

"A fig for your redskins! I never saw a dozen of them yet, from 'Black Dick' of the Apaches, down to a 'Yute,' who I couldn't thresh in ten minutes."

"Then everybody is not Tom Smithson," observed Benito.

"That's so!" exclaimed Tom, surveying his colossal proportions with a satisfied eye.

"Bother him!" interrupted Philip. "If you mean business, let's open shop."

"Here goes then. Two will be enough for the job, won't they, Ben?" inquired Tom.

"Two will do," returned Benito, curtly.

"Which two?"

"Any two."

"Tom, fair play," interposed Philip; "we all want to 'induce' the woman."

"Except Benito."

"Oh, yes, they have," and Domingo the speaker, glanced towards the tent meaningly.

"Friends," broke in Benito, probably not fancying the turn of the conversation, "shall we throw dice, or pull leaves for the choice?"

"Neither," replied Tom Smithson; "the only dice here are yours, and—well—ahem! you know."

Benito looked threateningly at him, but the giant had already forgotten what he said.

"You seem lazy—awful lazy, Tom," said Philip; "let's put a handful of groundnuts into the fire, and those two shall go to whom the first couple of nuts hop out."

"Or those two whose horses neigh first," said Ramon, exchanging a wink with another half-breed who was the sentinel, and who heard this.

"That's fair, and you won't have to get up neither," went on Philip.

With that the three men, for Benito went back to the tent, began looking at their horses, who were picketed, as we have said, on the border of the clearing.

Presently, while the sentinel at whom Ramon had winked was close to the horses (so close that it might be said he spoke to one of them) one of them neighed.

"Which one?"

"Whose was that?"

"Was it mine, Domingo?"

Domingo, thus made the umpire, unhesitatingly declared that it was Ramon's horse that had made the sound.

"Don't let us wait for the other one," said Tom who appeared to be as sluggish

and indolent as his brother said. "Who will you have for partner, Ramon?"

"We haven't to go until morning, have we?" inquired the half-breed.

"No."

"I'll fix on my man meanwhile," returned Ramon; and, rolling himself up in his *manga*, he fell asleep, after exchanging a significant sign with Master Domingo, whose knowledge of horses, which all Californian vaqueros possess, may have contributed to the brute's decision.

After smoking a pipe a-piece, the two Goliaths followed Ramon's example.

Benito had disappeared in the tent.

The sentinel alone kept awake, until his turn for rest came round, when he woke up another of the band, who had been slumbering during the whole of the conversation we have recorded.

In the morning, after a hearty breakfast, Ramon decided that Domingo should be his companion.

Benito called the two to him to give them their instructions.

"You will hang around Steel-arm's camp," said he, "until your chance comes to seize on the woman. You must ride far before you stop. Steel-arm is a first rate rastreador (trailer), no bloodhound is better, so you must strike for running water, kill your horses, and—(here he lowered his voice)—kill the woman. Then, do what you know how to do—hide your trail, and come back to us. Kill the woman, remember. We cannot be bothered with another."

The two half-breeds nodded assent and, bestriding their horses, started off.

We have seen how Madame Vandelles fell into their hands, and how Paddy Shanty just missed overtaking them.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE TRAIL.—THE COYOTES.

THE Californian had suffered internal injuries, which were of the kind whose first impression is but short, but which, if not allowed to have their time to wear away, return with double violence.

Few men have survived a grizzly bear's hug, but one of these few was Pablo.

His frame, so strong and healthy, speedily recovered, and save every rib ached and pain ran along every bone of the breast at the faintest movement, Pablo was himself again.

Hardly had an hour passed before he opened his eyes, drew a long breath with pain, and managed to lift himself so as to look round.

Paddy Shanty was standing near him, while he was himself lying on a blanket spread by the fire over the horses' cloths.

Cradle and Vandelles were gone away.

The latter had dashed off in a state bordering on madness, while the American had accompanied him, more in the idea of preventing him doing himself harm than through any hope of succeeding in the wild design of overtaking, on foot, two mounted men, with plenty of start in their favor.

When the Irishman noticed that Pablo had come to, he sent up a whoop of delight, and was on the point of executing a jig, of which he had traced the first step, when the recollection that perhaps had it not been for him, Bertha would not have been abducted, came to embitter his joy and cut short his Terpsichorean display.

At his shout, Jose left the fire and came up to Pablo.

The latter held out his hand to him, which he shook.

For a few moments still, the Californian's eyes could distinguish nothing clearly.

Pablo's first thought was for Bertha.

In the midst of that half sleep in which his mind floated, he opened his mouth to ask what had become of the young woman; but, at the same time, a vague idea of the mystery in which he had enclosed his love surged also in his brain.

But, unwittingly, Jose came to his aid and, in his desire to shield the Irishman from Steel-arm's wrath, he said:

"It was not Shanty's fault, Don Pablo the poor lady was taken without his being to blame."

"The lady!" exclaimed Pablo, staring around. "Where is Vandelles, and Cradle?" said he suddenly.

"Gone, sir," blubbered poor Paddy, 'the little lady, sir, was taken by two blackguards, whom I'll shoot if ever I come across them. Sure, hanging's too good for them?'"

"Come, come," said Pablo, sitting up and forcing himself to be calm, "tell me the whole story. I know you are not to blame, Shanty."

"Indeed, no, thank you, sir;" upon which the Irishman gave a tolerably clear account of the ravishment.

"You saw the men," said Pablo at the end of the recital, "were they Indians?"

"Not a bit of redskin, at all, sir," answered Paddy, "Black-muzzled chaps, with their hats over their eyes. I caught a glimpse of their horses between the trees, sir, and one had a red-spotted one, while t'other was all red."

"That will do; got me about half a pound of smoked beef out of your saddle-bag and put it on my horse's, along with a couple of handfuls of parched corn."

Pablo's intention was evident. He meant to go in search of Bertha, and such was the fire in his eyes, and so stern and unbending his manner, that neither of his companions thought of remonstrating with him.

Soon his horse was in readiness, and Steel-arm was helped into the saddle.

With a wave of his hand to his friends (who watched him depart misgivingly, and fell to work abusing each other for not having tried to stop his going the minute he was off), Pablo disappeared in the forest.

His first direction was to the spot where Shanty had described the ravishers' horses to have been put up.

Then clapping spurs to his horse, he dashed along the trail as swift as he could and yet not override the hoof-marks.

Thus rode he until dark, when he hobbled his horse, struck a light, measured the trail-marks so that, even if a rain should level them by morning, he would not be at a loss and went to rest on leaves, wrapped up in his zarape, where he slept so soundly in his exhaustion that he never minded the fright of his horse, which, scenting wild animals prowling around where "fresh meat" was situated, was in a series of fits and starts half the night.

Awakening early, and soothing his still alarmed horse Steel-arm mounted and once more took up the trail.

He noticed that the hoof-marks were blurred and smoothed in a great degree by the prints of smaller feet.

"Coyote!" muttered he.

In fact, he was not alone on the trail of Domingo and Ramon (as the reader will have guessed Bertha's abductors to have been), for a pack of coyotes, giving over mutual quarrels, had joined their forces to run down the horses.

Notwithstanding Pablo's iron will, nature exerted her powers over his body. His injuries far from helped to a cure by such a ride over uneven ground, were beginning to tell on him, and every breath he drew all but wrung a groan from him.

Despite himself, he would every now and anon find himself, with bowed head and relaxed muscles, drooping over his

horse's neck, when he would recover his balance, and sitting erect, look around him to make sure he had not "dropped" the trail.

From one of these kind of sleeping fits, he was aroused by a start of his horse, which, with open, snuffing nostrils, and tremulous ears, tried to turn back, but a dig of the heavy Mexican spurs forced it on once more.

However, the animal's obstinacy, arising from some danger ahead, and manifested in starts at every puff of air, awakened Pablo to himself.

He felt that he could not have caught up to those he pursued, yet, preparing for whatever might happen, straightened himself in his saddle and spurred on.

His horse's alarm increased every second and at last came to a dead halt.

The Californian's equine knowledge told him it would only be cruelty to force forward the horse as it was, and taking up his blanket he bound it in thick folds over his steeds' eyes.

Though its nostrils still quivered, the animal moved on a little less reluctantly.

Presently, some twenty yards from a turn which the trail had taken, Pablo's horse reared and plunged, and the rider too clearly comprehended that here he must give over further attempts to force it on.

So, quieting the animal as much as possibly, so that he could dismount, he fastened it with his lariat tightly to a tree, and stealthily proceeded along the tracks.

Soon he heard a snarling and ominous chattering of teeth which made him smile. Still he went on.

In a few seconds, he had before him a screen of foliage, where was only one gap. Through this he forced his head, which he instantly drew back; then, taking more precaution than he hitherto had done, he looked once more and for a longer time.

In a natural hollow, darkened with the tall trees, he had distinguished two masses of many colored forms, all in agitation—they were coyotes swarming over two dead horses, like jackals over the dead lion. Here and there were pairs and dozens of them fighting for bones.

All at once, Pablo, whose eyes had lowered instinctively, met another pair of eyes glaring at him.

For the space of a lightning's flash only did the eyes look at one another, for instantly Pablo drew back, while the coyote (which had dragged a part of the horse into the thicket, to eat it in peace) opened its bloody jaws to give a warning howl and skulked back to its companions.

A wild chorus of barks arose, while Pablo, overcoming his weakness, flew through the forest, straight to where he had fastened his horse, drawing his knife as he ran.

He reached it.

The poor steed was flecked with foam, its coat was beaded with hot sweat, and hardly had its master severed its bonds, and scrambled into his seat, than away it darted with a long line of coyotes at its heels.

Instinct led the beast.

Meanwhile, Cradle and Vandelles had returned to camp, unsuccessful as may be imagined, to hear of Steel-arm's departure on the search.

The party determined not to leave their camping-ground until they should have received news of Steel-arm, or of Bertha.

It was noonday, and the heat oppressive.

Vandelles, Cradle and Ribonne had taken themselves to rest in the shade, while Mundiaz was conversing with Shanty, who was on guard, a custom which was not deemed advisable to be

dispensed with since the firing by the Goliaths on the party and the abduction of Mrs. Vandelles.

All at once, the watchers started.

The sound of quick-coming horse's hoofs was audible.

Paddy woke up his friends, and all stood ready, with rifle in hand.

Presently, a neigh of pain rang out, and, with a coyote hanging on its flank and its rider, quite senseless, hugging its neck with fingers rigidly twisted in its mane, Pablo's horse—with the blanket floating round its head, steaming nostrils, heaving flanks—dashed into the middle of the camp.

A rifle shot from Cradle, and down dropped the coyote.

A half-dozen other shots sent back the foremost of the pack, and the rest, so suddenly checked in their chase, came up massing into line in front of the little party.

For a moment they glared menacingly, licking their dusty chops, but then they turned and fled helter-skelter, quickened by another discharge.

The Mexican and Paddy Shanty had caught the frightened horse without much difficulty, and had taken off the Californian.

Steel-arm was replaced on the very bed he had left that morning and to which he had so strangely returned.

For many hours, he showed no signs of life beyond the faint beatings of his heart and respiration as faint.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNION OF THE PARTIES.

SHANTY and Mundiaz wanted to keep the camp where it was, but Ribonne, Cradle and Vandelles thought it best to push on a day's stage farther, carrying Pablo as best they might.

Majority carried the day.

They stopped in a clearing, where a smouldering fire betokened the late presence of another party, which was, indeed, that of the Goliaths.

Long did Steel-arm continue in his seeming death.

When he did return to consciousness, he saw at his side his travelling companions.

His first thought was for Bertha; he opened his mouth to tell what he had learned, but, fearful of revealing the mystery with which he enshrouded his love, he was silent.

Shanty had replaced Ribonne, who held Pablo's head upon his knees.

During this time, Vandelles rubbed the legs of the Californian with pieces of cloth which Cradle warmed at the fire.

"Shanty!" murmured Steel-arm in a low voice.

"Glory to God!" cried Paddy Shanty with a start of joy, and letting the Californian's head fall to the ground. "He knows me! Hurrah—hurrah, my lads!"

All approached with symptoms of the most profound joy.

"I tell you this glass of whiskey will set him to rights," continued the honest Irishman; "there's nothing like it."

"Take care!" cried Ribonne.

"You shall see," said Paddy.

"Shanty," said Steel-arm, as the Irishman presented a flask full of whiskey to his lips, "is she found?"

Paddy sadly made a negative sign.

"If you didn't find her," said he, "no!"

Pablo closed his eyes.

This time, though, he regained consciousness promptly. Scarcely had he done so than he seized the flask of whiskey which Paddy held to his lips, and swallowed considerable of it.

"Take care, Shanty!" cried Vandelles "It will kill him."

"Never," replied Shanty. "Whiskey is the friend of a man."

At this moment, though, the "friend of a man," as Paddy styled it, burned the Californian's throat.

Such was Pablo's suffering that great drops of sweat forced themselves through the pores of his forehead. The fiery beverage nevertheless animated momentarily the Californian's strength.

"Assist me to rise," said he.

"But, Don Pablo," remonstrated Jose. He was placed upon his feet, but staggered like a drunken man.

"Lean me against a tree," said he.

They obeyed.

"Whiskey?" said he.

Vandelles and Ribonne interposed.

He did not reply to their observations, for he had no strength, but he repeated: "Some whiskey."

Shanty held out his bottle, but this time against his will.

Pablo drank silently. All his body quivered. The sweat again stood on his brow.

"There were men here," said he; "where have they gone?"

"They have gone," replied Vandelles.

"When?"

"Yesterday, I suppose," began Jose, "for the ashes of the fire were still warm when we reached here last evening."

"Here?"

"Yes, Don Pablo. For fifteen hours, at least, we have been here by you."

"Ah!" said Steel-arm, "and Madam Vandelles?"

"We have discovered nothing."

"You have doubtless taken some rest here?"

"A little."

"Then, forward!"

"Forward—and you?"

"Put me on a horse."

"You cannot hold on."

"Then tie me on."

All the representations of his friends were as nothing against the gambusino's will.

They placed him upon Bertha's mare.

Pablo's will vanquished his nature.

At the end of three miles he could hold himself in the saddle without aid and could speak to his companions.

When they made a halt at dusk, they wrapped the Californian in blankets and cloaks, and he slept a little.

The next morning he was much better.

They went on again at daybreak.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, Cradle and Jose, who were in front, stopped suddenly.

A troop of men appeared before them at the turn of a path.

"Who goes there?" challenged Jose.

"Gente de paz," replied one of the band.

Steel-arm recognized the voice of the *capataz* (who was Benito).

He raised himself in the saddle as well as his weakness would permit, and spurred the mare forward.

"Leave me to speak," said he to his friends.

At the same instant all of Benito's band issued from the wood.

These were composed of the six men we have seen, and two women, the wife of Benito, whom Pablo immediately recognized, for she was that Rosina, his former love, who had been supposed drowned. In due time, we shall probably learn how this report came to be false.

The other woman was named Cypriana, and filled a subordinate position in the party.

Pablo observed the two Goliaths amid the band.

At sight of the Californian the two carried their hands to their rifles.

"Order those men to be quiet," said

Steel-arm to the captain, and pointing out the Goliaths. "I wish to speak to you."

"What would you?" inquired Benito, making a sign to the Smithsons.

The two bands were equal in number.

Each consisted of six men; only Pablo's comrades were better armed, and this made Benito reflect.

"I believe that two of your men have stolen away a young woman who belonged to our troop," said Pablo, "the wife of this gentleman," added he, designating Vandelles.

"I don't know what you mean," replied Benito.

"I am certain of what I say," continued the Californian.

"What proof have you?"

Always calm and frigid in appearance, but his eyes glistening over his marble countenance, Pablo explained the different facts upon which he based his suspicions, which he had picked up in his "trailing."

"Why should I take the young woman," said the other, "what good would it do me? You see she is not with us."

"Some horses' feet were tracked to an encampment, and now we meet you upon the road," cried Vandelles.

"What does that prove? The men you speak of followed the same road as us, that is all. See our horses, the marks of their feet are still fresh. See if you can find those you have so carefully observed."

Pablo made a movement to go and verify the fact, but Jose retained him.

"Do not take the trouble," said he to Steel-arm, "that man is right. I looked."

"No matter," said Pablo, "I will see myself."

While he sought upon the ground for the prints left by the horses, a very lively discussion took place between Vandelles and Benito.

Yielding to his natural violence, the Frenchman grasped his revolver.

The companions of Benito unloosed their lassoes from the saddle.

"Steel-arm," cried Cradle.

The Californian ran and threw himself between the two disputants.

"Well, senor?" said Benito to Steel-arm.

"I can not make out the same traces," returned the latter.

"You see I told the truth."

"A word still," continued Steel-arm. "How is it that these two men (designating the Goliaths) are in your band?"

"The truth is," responded Benito, "that they joined me lately."

"And you received them, knowing them to be assassins?"

"Caramba! senor, you do not know in what position we are. There is before us a band of Indians more than a hundred strong."

"Did you see them?"

"No, thank heaven! if I had I would not now be conversing with your lordship; but we struck their tracks, and that is why we have retraced our road. One moment or another, the red devils might fall upon us, and two rifles like the Goliaths are not to be scorned in such circumstances."

According to the exceptional manner of the placers, nothing could be answered to this.

"Don Pablo," continued the half-breed, "be reasonable. We are twelve well-armed men. United, we can easily resist a party of the Apaches. If we separate, there is all the chances in the world that we will be wiped out by these redskins. Let us unite our forces and remain here, till we have overcome the danger menacing us at this moment. Once out of danger, each one can take his route. If you have anything against

the Goliaths, you can then settle with them."

Pablo for an instant was silent.

In appearance, Benito's proposition was reasonable.

Divers indications had led Steel-arm to suppose that a band of Indians were hunting in the neighborhood.

"I will consult my companions," said he at last.

"Perfectly natural," replied Benito.

The two leaders separated from each other.

"This man is keeping something back, I am certain," said Pablo to his comrades. "I think though, that I shall accept his proposition."

"Unite with such bandits," cried Vandelles, "with the Goliaths!"

"That is the only means of obtaining some clue of Madam Vandelles' fate," returned Pablo. "Besides, an Indian attack is very probable, and we shall be twelve to repulse them."

"Steel-arm is right," said Cradle. "For the present, we have no other course to take than to join Benito's men."

"What do you hope to obtain?" began Vandelles. "Everything seems to prove that these men had nothing to do with my wife's disappearance."

"I don't give things up so quickly as this," said Pablo, "and I persist in believing them guilty. Besides, by remaining here a little while, I count upon learning the truth."

"How so?"

"Trust in me."

While Pablo and the gold-hunters concerted together, Benito conversed with his men and recounted his interview with Steel-arm.

"Am I not tricking them finely?" said he, rolling a cigarette between his fingers. "Can you not guess why I wish to make a union of our two bands?"

"No," said one of the Goliaths, frowning.

"Well, see why. First, as I have heard everybody say for a long time, and heard it also recently, this Steel-arm is the man who knows the country better than we do."

"True," said Philip.

"Well, if any one can save us from the Indians, and without danger lead us through these cursed plains of the Calleja, Pablo can do so. Once delivered from the Apaches, we can find some means of ridding ourselves of these useless companions. What say you?"

"You are right, Benito. Only this fellow, Steel-arm, is very difficult to surprise."

"We can always try."

At the end of a quarter of an hour the two bands came together again. It was agreed that they were to march in concert till the day when they would be relieved from all fear of the Indians.

Steel-arm and Benito consulted together on the different precautions to be taken, not only against the Apaches, but also to protect each party against surprise from the other.

For the equality of number to always exist, it was settled that the duties of scouts, sentinels, etc., should be two by two, composed of an individual of each band.

Jose was associated with Philip, Cradle with Domingo, Ribonne with Ramon, and Paddy Shanty with Pepe Nieto.

Steel-arm and Benito naturally found themselves placed on the same line, but Pablo observed with reason, that it would be desirable for the chief to be with the main body of the expedition.

After this advice, which Benito followed, the latter took Vandelles for a companion, while Pablo enjoyed the amiable company of Tom Smithson.

Pablo's design in bringing about this arrangement, was to have the means

from time to time to remain alone with Rosina, from whom he hoped to obtain some revelations upon Bertha's fate.

He feared also that some discussion would arise between Goliath and Vandelles.

As for Benito, a sentiment of jealousy had pushed him to consent to his association with the Frenchman.

He had remarked that, at different times, Rosina had approached the latter as if she wished to speak to him.

On his side, Vandelles had from time to time looked at the young woman whom he evidently tried to recollect.

Rosina had hastened to wrap her rebozo around her, but Vandelles, struck by a confused remembrance, had frequently let his eyes dwell on the pretty Spaniard.

In the evening, Rosina profited by the moment when Benito unsaddled his horse, to furtively approach Vandelles.

"Mr. Marel," said she in a low tone.

At this name, which he had ceased to bear since his departure from San Fernando, the Frenchman felt all his recollection revive.

"What, is this you, Rosina?" cried he.

"Silence, for the love of heaven!" she began; "do not have the appearance of recognizing me—"

"Why not?"

"I have not time to explain, but, in the name of all you hold dear in the world, say nothing to Benito of what passed at San Fernando. You will be the cause of my death."

"He will have to cross over my dead body first," cried Vandelles, "I swear—"

Rosina moved away abruptly.

She observed Benito's eyes fixed upon her.

The half-breed threw his saddle upon the grass and, without hobbling his horse as usual, he ran up to Rosina.

"What did you say to that Frenchman?" inquired he in a suspicious manner.

"He asked me if we had met any Indians," said the young woman.

"That is well. If those are the sort of questions he makes, tell him that it is to me that in future they should be addressed."

"Your jealousy is absurd, Benito; you well know that Mr. Vandelles is married, since it is his wife whom these travellers came to you to reclaim."

"No matter, I forbid you conversing with these men. If one or the other should question you, remember that the Goliaths joined us lately, and that none of our band is, or has been, absent."

"But Ramon and Domingo—"

"I don't want them to know that. Revealing that circumstance would immediately bring us against each other."

"I will be silent," said Rosina, thinking of Pablo.

Restraining the impatience which gnawed him, and pretending to occupy himself upon the route to be followed, Steel-arm examined all around him.

The most insignificant circumstances were noted in his memory.

They had scarcely gone more than two miles before Pablo perceived that Ramon and Domingo were mounted upon horses not yet entirely subdued. From their restlessness under the harness, it was evident that these horses had but recently been torn from their life of liberty.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE INUNDATION.

CRADLE made many jokes upon Domingo, whose horse, a brown-bay stallion, with flashing and savage eyes rear-

ed without advancing, and replied by fearful bounds to the spurs of the former vaquero.

"I think that it would not be bad for us to light a fire and put on the coals some strips of *tasafo* (beef dried in the sun)," said Cradle. "They will have plenty of time to cook before you can move a foot."

"Caramba! this horse is possessed of a demon," cried Domingo.

"Bah!" returned Cradle, "we Americans know how to fix these demons. Our spurs would soon bring them to reason."

"*Capa de Dios!* I should give something to meet a Yankee who could *brisat* a horse as quickly as I."

"As quickly, say you?" repeated Cradle, in a railing tone. "Good! You have failed to make him leap this fir-tree. Before the end of the journey, you will be obliged to shoot that horse of yours."

"May all the devils of hell break the necks of you and this d—d beast!" cried Domingo, exasperated. "The first mustang we meet, I will give to you, and we will see if you can *quebrantado* (break in) it at the end of two days."

"Oh! ho! you have had yours a fortnight, at least."

"Bah! any one can see you're a Yankee. I took him but day before yesterday, at the same time as Ramon's."

This was all which Cradle wished to know, but he nevertheless continued his pleasantries, to occupy Domingo.

The latter seemed to regret what he had said, and evidently sought to discover if Cradle had taken particular note of it.

But, with his careless and phlegmatic air, the American feigned not to attach any importance to the response, and soon changed the subject of conversation.

Some minutes after, in passing, as if by accident, by Steel-arm, he said hurriedly in a low tone:

"You are right. The horses were taken two days ago."

At the end of a half-hour's march, Pablo, who conducted the two united bands, abruptly changed the direction.

"We are falling back upon the route which I followed, and which leads near the Indians," said Benito, galloping up to him.

"There is no means of doing otherwise," replied Pablo. "We will change it again in an hour. Besides, leave me to go forward."

"Goliath with you?"

"No. I'll trust you. I am the only one of us who can go near these Indians without the risk of discovery. Halt, and wait me here."

The project evidently displeased Benito, but, evidently, also, he could not give his true motive.

Pablo went off, without listening to him.

He remained absent about three hours.

"Well?" said Benito, when he returned.

"I have seen the Indians' foot-prints—they are Apaches. You see yonder *cerro* (peak of a mountain) three miles on our right? Well, we must gain it quickly. At the foot of the penon we will find a long *canada* (ravine). We follow that. The day after to-morrow, we will put between the Indians and us the precipices which border that penon, and we will be in safety for some time."

"You are right," cried Benito, Steel-arm's words relieving him of a great weight. "That is the best thing we can do."

"Forward, then, all," said Ribonne.

"No," said Pablo, frowning; "it is too late. To-morrow, by the first rays of the sun."

"Well, Don Pablo," inquired Vandelles, advancing to the gambusino

"have you met with any indication of my poor wife's whereabouts?"

"None," replied Steel-arm, loudly shaking the Frenchman's hand.

To the latter's great surprise, he felt the Californian push a paper into his hand.

He feared for a moment that Benito had observed the action, but luckily he did not.

The half-breed had turned his head away at the moment when Pablo had responded negatively to Vandelles' question.

A few minutes afterwards, the latter remained a little behind the others, on the pretence of arranging his bridle.

He precipitately opened the paper and read these words, traced with the juice of wild berries:

"It was two of these men who abducted Madame Vandelles. I have the proof. The Indians are far from us and cannot bear the report of fire-arms. The Canada of Rosario is very narrow and steep. Men must dismount to follow it. Our enemies then lose their advantages. Be ready. When I cry: '*God for the right!*' throw yourself upon the man nearest to you. Spare Benito, Ramon, and Domingo. We have need of their revelations to recover Madame Vandelles. Pass this note to the next, and be prudent. I will warn Jose and Shanty, who cannot read."

During the repast, Vandelles executed Steel-arm's instructions.

In the singular position of the two bands, from their force so nearly approaching, each one observed the others with extreme attention.

By writing the note, Pablo wished to avoid speaking successively to each of his comrades or holding with them a sort of council.

He did not want his enemies put upon their guard.

All would have passed well, but, next day, as they began the march again, Ribonne spoilt everything.

There was in the Frenchman an idea of producing an effect, which made him forget all caution.

Expecting a combat, he took to himself all the airs of a conspirator.

His eyebrows frowned, and he spoke mysterious words; then he stroked his moustache and played with his weapons.

Steel-arm quickly perceived that Benito, an observer like all the men of his race, remarked the Frenchman's manner.

The Californian approached Ribonne and made him understand the foolishness of his theatrical motions.

Ribonne promised henceforth to cease them, but he promised more than he could do.

Besides, the evil was done.

Steel-arm also observed that Benito gave some recommendations to his men.

From that moment, the latter evidently redoubled their vigilance and circumspection.

The two bands, however, were not slow to enter the narrow ravine of which Steel-arm had spoken.

Ten minutes afterwards, each man, holding his horse by the bridle, marched one after the other.

Pablo was the first and always a little in advance; Goliath followed him.

Coming after them again were Ribonne and Ramon, Vandelles and Benito.

The latter watched over Rosina and her child, after whom came Cypriana, Domingo and Cradle, Philip Smithson and Jose.

Pepe Nieto and Shanty closed the train.

We must now retrace our steps to learn what has become of poor Bertha Vandelles.

Ramon and Domingo, as we have seen, were charged with this enterprise and

recommended to profit by a moment when Pablo was absent.

As related, the two vaqueros had left on the evening of Tuesday.

During all the day of Wednesday, they had followed the gold-hunters at a little distance.

We have seen also by what manner Shanty had left Madame Vandelles.

Scarcely had the faithful Irishman left the side of the young woman than the two vaqueros, gliding on their breasts through the wood, rushed upon Bertha. They threw a *manga* (a sort of Mexican cloak) around her head, and carried her to the place where their horses were stationed.

Once mounted, Ramon had taken before him the young woman securely bound.

Then the two went off at a gallop in an opposite direction from that of their friends.

Following Benito's commands, they had journeyed a good part of the night.

Then, after some instants' repose, they had, at sunrise, retaken their course, still in the same direction.

Thursday evening only, some time after crossing a marsh, they had profited by the neighborhood of a clump of thick trees to make a few hours' halt.

They had unsaddled the horses, and hastened to prepare their *pinole* and cook their strips of *cecina*.

As they had no fear that Bertha would attempt to escape in this immense desert unknown to her, the vaqueros had unbound her; she could thus walk by their side, and rest herself a little from the journey of many miles, accomplished in a most incommodious position.

"Ah," said Ramon, "what shall we do with this little woman now?"

"You know what Benito told us," returned Domingo.

"I think that cruel."

"Bah!" said Domingo, "you are very tender-hearted."

"I don't like to kill women."

"Above all, when they are pretty, you mean?"

"That's so. I say, Domingo, this woman pleases me."

"Aha!"

"Does that annoy you?"

"Not the least in the world. She pleases me also, and I spoke of killing her only to see what you thought."

"And Cypriana?"

"She is far away. Leave her alone."

"Caramba! this puzzles me," said Ramon, contracting his brows.

"Come, come," said Domingo, "let your machete lie still. I make a proposal to you: let us play for the *senora*."

"At what game?"

"I have Benito's dice."

"Humph!"

"You suspect me, amigo?"

"And for good reason, amigo."

"Ramon!"

"In your turn, keep quiet. Give me the dice till I examine them."

"No," replied Domingo. "Your suspicions wound my honor as a caballero."

"As you will," returned Ramon, who knew at what terms to count upon his comrade's honor.

"Let us play monte," said Domingo, after some little silence.

"So be it; I have my cards."

"And I, mine."

"Very well; let's begin. How many games shall we play?"

"Five, if you will."

"I consent."

Two minutes afterwards, the two bandits gave themselves up to all the emotions of monte, so powerful amongst the Mexicans.

At the commencement of the play, they glanced frequently upon Bertha, who was extended upon the grass a few paces from them.

But soon the intoxication of monte made them nearly forget the poor creature who was the stake of their game.

Bertha profited by this distraction to move away by degrees, and soon disappeared in the wood.

"Capa de Dios!" suddenly cried Ramon, who had lost an *albur*, "There has the Frenchwoman gone?"

"She has not gone far, be sure," said Domingo laughing; "she is too much frightened to remain here alone to be lost."

"But—" "Hush! hark!"

They heard a dull sound, which each moment grew louder and which seemed to rapidly approach.

"What is that?" demanded Ramon. "Is it not a tempest? How fast it comes!"

"Voto al Demonio!" cried Domingo, "I think the torrents of the Sierra Mazitta have broken into Bird's River."

They precipitately rose, rushed to horse, and galloped almost to the bank of the river.

"Caramba!" said Ramon, "you are right. See how the river runs and rises. It is time to save ourselves."

"We must catch our prisoner again." And they called upon Madam Vandelles with all their strength.

They uselessly searched on all sides. From time to time, they stopped to call again.

"Hasten, hasten!" shouted they; "in a few hours the earth will be flooded, the river overflows—if you wish to live, come quickly."

"Let her go to the devil!" cried Domingo at last. "I don't want to be drowned for her—in a few minutes we will be dead! To horse again and spur!"

While uttering these words, he gave the reins to his horse and galloped off.

Ramon followed him, after casting a last look behind.

Hidden among a mass of young birch trees and *tulas* (a sort of reed), two or three hundred paces from the vaqueroes, Bertha had heard their voices and their sinister prediction.

Frozen with terror at the announcement of the inundation, whose sound already reached her, the poor woman cowered in her retreat.

The looks and words of the two had filled her with such fears, that any danger appeared preferable to falling into the power of the vaqueroes.

When she was certain of their departure, she cautiously came out of her concealment.

After a long time looking about her to assure herself of the Mexicans' absence, Bertha ran as fast as possible from the river.

Unfortunately it was too late. The water spread out around her with fearful rapidity.

The inundation came not only by the natural bed of the river, but also by the flat ground which bordered the river, and upon which Bertha was running.

At the end of a few minutes the water rose to her waist.

But fortunately the current in this place was not so swift as in the river.

The water spread in a sheet around Bird's River, and formed a sort of valley with the declivity parallel to the river.

This sheet of water was more and more augmented as different little rivulets and torrents came foaming down to enter it.

Soon Madam Vandelles was in the middle of an immense lake, whose waves rising swiftly, bore her from her feet.

She closed her eyes and murmured: "Pablo, I love you. Now, at least I can say it without it being a crime."

The current, more and more rapid, swept the young woman along, at last throwing her against a submerged tree.

Bertha held up her hand which

touched a branch, and clutched it with the energy of despair.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RESCUE.

ACCUSTOMED to brave dangers from the sad existence she had led for two years, the young woman wanted neither courage nor coolness.

She seized a higher branch, then a second, and raised herself two or three feet above the still-rising water.

Soon Bertha was obliged to climb higher.

This was a most painful undertaking for a woman.

But fortunately the tree which the young woman had clung to was an *ahuehuelt*.

Its height, and regular disposition of its branches, rendered Bertha's ascension easier.

Animals of every species continually passed by her side.

Some swam, and vainly sought to stem the current; other caught at the different trees uprooted by the water.

Amongst other animals, Madam Vandelles saw pass two jaguars.

One of them was crouching in the branches of a cypress, which nearly touched the tree upon which Bertha was.

The jaguar, who appeared much frightened at its nautical excursion, made a spring to jump upon the *ahuehuelt*.

The cypress turned under the animal's bound—the latter missed its aim, and fell into the river.

Some minutes after, it was lost to Bertha's view.

When night came, the terrors already so cruel, were augmented to the poor woman.

For fear that she might yield to sleep, Madam Vandelles attached herself to the trunk of the tree with her girdle.

This was a useless precaution.

In spite of her fatigue, poor Bertha could not close her eyes.

At every instant, trunks of trees, and ruins of every description struck her asylum, and made it bend with the shock.

Then, with the splashing of the water came the frightful yells and roars of wild beasts, who were carried along by the resistless current.

At times, also, Bertha would see scintillate through the obscurity, two luminous points, which were the eyes of some wild animal swept along by the river.

Then Bertha closed her eyes and prayed.

The rising of the sun gave a moment of relief and joy for the poor creature.

The spectacle offered to her eyes was still despairing.

Around her was an immense lake, in the center of which the river could be recognized by the rapidity of its current, as well as by the mud and foam which came from contact of the banks and the waves.

Towards night, Bertha commenced to feel the pangs of hunger; she had eaten nothing for thirty-six hours.

She was thirsty and yet dared not descend for a little water; she feared, with reason, being caught by the water, and dreaded, above all, that she would not have the power to remount, for she felt her strength more and more become enfeebled.

The nights of Friday and Saturday were less cruel than the preceding ones.

Overcome by fatigue, Bertha slept some hours, notwithstanding her painful position.

She awoke stiff with cold, and dying with hunger.

Thirst gave such sufferings that she could not longer withstand it; she descended branch by branch; then, clinging with her left arm to the tree, she drank a little water from her right hand.

She tried finally to again climb to the summit of the tree, but her strength was gone.

Twice or thrice she fell back.

All at once, while weeping and praying, Bertha heard in the distance, the sound of a human voice.

The poor woman quivered with hope; she, by a desperate effort, reached a few limbs higher, and gazed around her with eyes full of anxiety.

For some moments she could see nothing, tears obscured her vision.

Finally she distinguished a canoe, formed from a trunk of a tree, in which a man was seated.

This man appeared to be attempting to cross the river just above Madam Vandelles.

Either this man's voice could not now reach her, or he kept silence at this moment, for Bertha heard nothing more.

She screamed with all her power, shook her handkerchief, and did all she could to attract the person's attention.

The latter continued his way without turning his head; evidently he neither saw nor heard anything.

Soon his voice raised again.

To Bertha's great surprise she could distinctly understand what he sang.

The wind, which prevented the stranger from hearing the woman's voice, brought to her the young man's words.

These words became more and more defined, and Bertha soon perceived that the dug-out was approaching her.

It was almost insensibly borne by the current down the river, and was crossing the stream in an oblique line.

Bertha again essayed to cry out, but her breath died on her lips.

She resolved to await the moment when the canoe would come nearer the *ahuehuelt*.

As the boatman ceased the last notes of his song, he rose and looked about him in Bertha's direction.

The latter again shook her white handkerchief, which she had put at the end of a broken branch, and united all her strength for a superhuman scream.

This time the sound reached the boatman.

He made a gesture of surprise and looked around him, but unfortunately along the level of the water, without even glancing above.

For one moment, Bertha believed he would pass without perceiving her.

She made a short prayer before a new effort.

The poor woman was at the end of her strength as the last cry thrilled for a few seconds.

The man in the canoe raised his eyes, and at last saw the handkerchief.

Then he perceived Madam Vandelles, who was leaning out from the foliage at the risk of falling.

For a moment the stranger remained motionless as if he knew not what to do.

Then he re-seated himself and retook the paddles, which he had let fall upon looking about him.

"What is he doing?" inquired Bertha inwardly, seeing that he paddled as if to continue to cross the river.

The young woman was soon re-assured.

Driven by the current, the canoe approached the *ahuehuelt*.

The man used his paddle but to steer the log, and to avoid the floating mass of trees, and drift-wood around him.

At the moment when the canoe had arrived within five or six feet of the *ahuehuelt*, it struck against the remains of another tree submerged under the water, and swung half round.

Then, carried by the current, it passed Bertha, who uttered a despairing cry.

The man rose and took in his right hand a stone to which was attached a long rope, the other end of which he held in his left hand.

Thrown vigorously, the stone struck the cedar, in the branches of which the rope became entangled.

Then the stranger, hauling upon the cord, pulled the canoe to the tree.

That ended, he climbed to where Bertha was clinging.

He was a young man of about twenty years of age, of stature a little above the middling height. His hat was of black felt with narrow brims, from under which fell long chestnut hair. His features, with clear blue eyes, expressed a mixture of firmness, simplicity, courage and timidity. His face was of a German cast.

When near Bertha, he raised his hat and said, "Good day," with a gravity which excluded all idea of ill-timed pleasantry.

Madam Vandelles stammered a few words.

"You are hungry, poor woman," said the young man, who divined it more from her movement than the inarticulate words. "Stay, here is some sea-biscuit, fortunately."

He at the same time, tendered a morsel of biscuit which he took from a game-bag slung from his shoulders.

"I am thirsty still," murmured Bertha.

"I will seek for some water."

"No," said she, "let us reach the land."

"I think that it will be better to wait a little while longer," returned the young man. "I already have had great trouble in managing the boat. With two persons it will be impossible."

"In the name of your mother, abandon me not!"

"No," cried he. "Luke Kermain will never leave a person in danger. We will both be saved, or we will both perish together."

"Suppose the current carries away your boat, while you are here?"

"I hope not, madam," continued he, "I am not very strong; my arms are wearied, and I cannot paddle much longer without a little rest."

"Let us wait then," said Bertha sadly.

"I will tie the boat more securely, and will bring you some water."

In five minutes' time, Luke remounted near Bertha.

He bore a little water in a sort of wooden porringer, and a sorry cloak, full of holes, which he threw upon the young woman's shoulders.

He took from his game-bag a little gourd of brandy, and emptied a few drops into the porringer.

"Drink," said he. "It is brandy. The woman with whom I lodged at San Francisco gave me it—and the cloak also."

A little revived by the sad repast, Madam Vandelles asked her companion in captivity what was his project.

"In an hour, I shall be rested," said Kermain. "You will descend with me into the boat; then, we will attempt to gain the shore."

"Do you hope we will succeed?" inquired the young woman anxiously.

"Heaven alone knows."

Following the curiosity natural to all human creatures, Bertha questioned the young man from the legitimate desire of knowing the new guide in whose hands she was to place her life and honor.

She began by explaining how she was caught by the flood and recounted part of her adventures.

Then she in her turn asked some questions

Kermain told his name, said he was from Germany, and that he was going to the mines.

"Alone?" said Bertha.

"Yes."

"Without tools, baggage, or provisions?"

"I have not money enough to buy all those."

"And do you seek your fortune under such conditions?"

"Yes, for my old parents."

"Your father and mother?"

"No, my grandfather and grandmother," said the young German who, sat astride a bough, looking upon his boat, which things of all sorts struck as they floated down the river.

After a half hour or so, he said: "It is time to go."

He aided the young woman to descend.

Bertha seated herself cautiously in the stern of the craft.

Luke was facing her, using the oars, roughly fashioned from long branches of the fir-tree.

As he commenced to row, Bertha perceived that his hands were bloody.

"Poor boy, how you have suffered," cried she.

"Our Saviour suffered more for us," replied Luke.

Bertha remarked that his words and the mystical light which sometimes gleamed from the young man's eyes had something in them which raised in her mind doubts upon the reason of her guide. The latter began to row with more vigor and energy than could be expected from his slight and feeble form.

Many times the canoe was unmanageable where certain bends of the stream caused the water to run more or less swiftly.

Then Kermain ceased rowing and stood still in the boat. When he perceived a tree in the way he lassoed it; by this means, hauling the boat from all danger.

At the end of an hour of such perils and efforts, Luke and Bertha crossed the river and inundated ground.

When upon firm land, Bertha fell upon her knees and thanked heaven for her rescue.

Perhaps Pablo had something to do with the tears which flowed down the young woman's cheeks.

Then she and her companion took their route.

Bertha soon saw that Luke Kermain made a poor guide.

It was truly a miracle that he could have traveled so long a while in these solitudes without becoming the victim of some accident.

"What direction were you to taking when you met me?" inquired she.

"I know not. On leaving San Francisco, they told me that the mines were to the north-north-east; I have always gone in that direction. The first days, I met men who told me what road to take, later I followed the traces of other miners; but for four days I have had nothing to guide me."

"Then I suppose you do not care how you go, while you reach the mines?"

"Yes, but I must bring you to your friends."

"They go to the mines; so, you cannot do better than to join them."

"As you will."

Luckily for the two, they had disembarked near the place where Ramon and Domingo had slain their horses, and where Pablo had nearly met his death.

Since the two years that she, with her husband, had travelled through California, Bertha had learnt in some manner to proceed through the forests.

Besides, the two bands of Steel-arm and Benito, having no motive in concealing their route, had left behind them traces easy to recognize.

The ardent desire of again being among her traveling companions, of seeing her husband and Pablo, gave to Bertha astonishing strength.

For food she had but the sea-biscuit Luke had divided with her; the thought of the morrow, with no other nourishment than that unsubstantial provision, spurred her on, and she quickened her march, already so rapid, to rejoin her companions.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ATTACK.

NOTWITHSTANDING his inurement to the perilous life of the placers, in which he had had many struggles with unscrupulous enemies, Pablo had always retained a sort of chivalrous nobleness which held him from striking adversaries before they were upon their guard.

But as soon as he was certain of Benito's bad faith, and that he suspected some treason, he could not but decide to give the signal of attack.

Twice or thrice already, he had turned to give the expected order, but his mouth closed without its utterance.

Soon, though, he made up his mind.

They arrived at the extremity of the canada; a few minutes more, the travelers would reach a rather broad plateau.

Once there Benito's companions would mount their horses and Pablo's troop would lose all their advantages.

Steel-arm thought of Bertha, and turned towards his followers, with the intention this time of giving the signal.

His piercing glance examined the position of each individual and for an instant scrutinized the horizon to be assured that no other danger was near.

Suddenly he made a movement so abrupt that Goliath, frightened, carried his hand quickly to his rifle.

Pablo had perceived behind the miners, two persons who followed the gold-hunters.

The latter, turning like Steel-arm, also saw the two individuals.

They were still so distant that they appeared but as two black specks at the extremity of the canada.

"Those are not Indians," said Benito, whose sight was more keen than that of the other travelers.

The ravine was so narrow, especially in this place, that two persons could not walk abreast.

Nevertheless, Steel-arm could not resist his impatience; he ordered the band to halt.

Then, pressing past the projections of rocks, branches and trunks of trees, and briars, he passed the train, and reached the rear-guard.

"Whither go you?" inquired Vandelles.

"To see who they are who are coming," replied the Californian.

"Something tells me that there is news of poor Bertha," cried the Frenchman, "I will follow you."

Pablo thought that it was a great imprudence on the part for the two at once to leave their friends; Benito's band could, in fact, profit by its superiority to attack them.

But as Vandelles retorted to Pablo's observation by one of the like nature, the Californian allowed the Frenchman to pass before him.

"God of heaven!" cried out Vandelles, "it is Bertha herself!"

Steel-arm had from some time before recognized the young woman.

He would have given all the world to run and exhibit the joy he felt; the throbs of his heart were so violent and rapid that he almost heard them vibrating in his brain.

He had nevertheless the courage, not only to repress them, but still to see Vandelles meet her, while he himself remained behind the miners.

In embracing her husband, Bertha hung her head like a criminal.

The young woman thought of Pablo and understood all he suffered.

"Poor Pablo," thought she, "who loves me?"

She advanced to Steel-arm and extended her hand.

She said nothing, but shook Pablo's hand and looked at him as if in that snake and that look she wished to appear all the thoughts of love and acknowledgement which her mouth dared not express.

"How you are changed," murmured she.

"I was a little sick," replied he; "but I suffer no longer."

Bertha herself was much changed.

Fatigue, sleeplessness, and uneasiness had creased her features, and hollowed her eyes.

The other miners had also recognized her; they thronged around her.

Paddy Shanty, weeping like a child, came also to her.

"Shanty," said the young woman, tendering a hand to the Irishman who scarcely dared to touch it, "it was no way your fault, what has happened. No one could have been surrounded with more cares and solicitude than I have been by you all, my good friends."

While speaking this, her eyes involuntarily sought Pablo, who contemplated her with emotion.

The Californian's heart bounded with joy on seeing the affection of the young woman which all his comrades witnessed.

While Bertha recounted to her friends the incidents of her abduction, and presented Luke Kermain to them, Benito and Goliath held council with their comrades.

"Our plan has gone to the deuce," cried Benito. "This cursed woman will tell all to her friends—she will recognize Ramon and Domingo. Miserable brutes!" began he angrily to the two vaqueros, "why did you not kill as I ordered you?"

"We thought her drowned," replied Domingo. "How the devil did we know she escaped?"

"Benito," said Philip Smithson, stopping the flow of reproaches and insults the half-breed was pouring forth, "leave what is done alone. Since unluckily this woman is living, we must act the same as if she were dead. What part will we take?"

"Wait," said Tom.

"I think not," said Domingo. "Steel-arm's band is more numerous than ours; with their rifles and pistols, they have the advantage over us."

"To day, they will hesitate to use them," observed Benito.

"Why so?"

"On account of the Indians."

"The Indians are far away. Present danger should always be settled first."

"My idea," continued Benito, "is to profit by the moment when they are all occupied with the woman. We can kill one or two before they are on their guard. After that, we are masters of all."

"Very well," said the giant. "I will take care of Steel-arm—once he's dead, we will easily manage the rest."

"Make the women go in advance," said Philip; "that will occasion least distrust, and we can attack them unawares."

"No," cried Benito; "they may receive a bullet. Let them on the contrary remain behind us."

"Then let me pass before," said Tom.

Absorbed by the joy which Bertha's

return had caused him, Pablo had forgotten the enemies around.

Cradle, always calm and prudent, luckily watched for him.

He crawled through the legs of the two miners before him and almost reached Pablo.

"Look alive!" said he in a low tone. "See, Benito and the Goliath are together."

In face of peril, Pablo instantly regained his coolness.

"Let no one stir from his place," said he to the two gold-hunters who were nearest to him.

"Transmit my words from one to the other without turning your heads. Let each one take care of the man who is nearest to him. As for you," continued he to Bertha, "remain a little in the rear, and, I entreat you, stir not from behind the horses—with that shelter you have nothing to fear."

"What is to happen?" inquired she anxiously.

"A contest which your arrival cannot prevent."

She, in anguish, raised her eyes to

en.

"Can you recognize here the two men who took you away?"

"Yes," responded she. "They are those men you see behind Philip Smithson. The first of the two is the one on whose horse I was carried."

The recollection of the words and actions of Ramon sent a burning heat to Bertha's brow.

"Did he insult you?" said Pablo in a trembling voice.

She turned away her head to conceal her blushes and confusion, which too well answered Steel-arm's question.

A light flashed from Pablo's eyes and his lips violently contracted. He made a bound and seized a strong branch of an oak which hung eight or ten feet above the ravine. Then he swung himself forward and fell between Jose and Cradle who were the nearest to the great portion of Benito's troop.

At the moment when Pablo's feet touched the ground, Goliath rushed upon Cradle, whom he knocked down with a blow from the butt-end of his rifle. The giant instantly cocked the gun and lifted it to his shoulder to fire at Steel-arm. The latter fell upon his breast, glided like a snake by the stupefied American's side, and precipitated himself upon Ramon. He struck him with his machete, a blow delivered with such force—or better, such rage—that the steel penetrated many inches within the vaquero's skull. Ramon threw up his arms and fell lifeless, like a mass.

Steel-arm's weapon was so deeply driven into the unfortunate man's head, that, to disengage it, he was obliged to press his foot firmly on the corpse.

Pepe Nieto profited by this moment to throw his lasso upon Steel-arm, who suddenly felt his arms encircled by the terrible running knot.

He instantly ran upon Nieto; the shock was so violent that both fell.

Nieto was above and as he had not released his grasp of the lasso he paralyzed all of Steel-arm's movements.

"To me!" cried Pepe. "A good thrust of a knife between the shoulders of this coyote will put him out of our way—he cannot use his arms."

Benito and Domingo did not hear him. The two were crawling along to surprise the gold-finders.

Philip, who was behind Pepe Nieto, ran to his aid.

At the moment when the American raised his bowie-knife Steel-arm, giving a slight turn, changed the position of the combatants, and he held Nieto above like a buckler.

"Damnation!" cried Philip, whose knife struck the vaquero's head.

"Hold the lasso," cried Nieto, "good—give it a turn around a tree; hold the cord so he cannot stir! hold it, demonio!"

"How can I? Steel-arm advances to the tree; that slackens the cord."

"Pass it up higher then, and take him by the feet."

Steel-arm's weight and strength threatening a break in the thong as he pressed against Philip's endeavors, Nieto carried his hand to his belt to draw his faithful *navaja*.

At this moment, a female leant from above the two combatants.

Pablo felt the noose relax.

Rosina had cut the lasso.

"D—your eyes!" shouted Philip, aiming at her.

Steel-arm had already grasped Nieto by the throat and belt.

He threw him with tremendous force upon Smithson.

The latter staggered and the bullet went harmlessly whistling through the air.

He let his knife fall to use his bowie-knife, but Pablo did not give him the time.

A shot from Domingo delivered point blank upon the giant, sent him rolling upon the ground—no more to rise.

Nieto, who had drawn his *navaja*, received a cut from a machete, and he fell dead on Philip's lifeless corpse.

"Thanks, Rosina," muttered Pablo, making a gesture of acknowledgement to the young woman, to whom Cypriana was speaking with vivacity.

Then, leaping over the bodies of his adversaries, Steel-arm darted to the succor of his comrades.

At the other extremity of the Canada, Benito's band had the advantage, chiefly from Goliath's prodigious strength.

The latter had discharged his rifle at Jose, but the Mexican had bent so timely that the ball passed over his head.

Then Tom, grasping his weapon by the barrel, brandished it like a feather.

At the first blow he had upset Jose, whose machete lightly wounded him upon the shoulder.

Then with a second stroke, he overthrew Ribonne, when Vandelles, placing his foot upon the body of his countryman, cast himself between him and the American.

The latter was too near Vandelles to use his rifle. He, therefore, let it fall and drew his bowie-knife.

Unfortunately for Vandelles, Ribonne made a sudden attempt to rise, and his countryman half fell.

On the other side of the Frenchman, Shanty with his rifle was seeking vainly to shoot Goliath, whose struggle with Vandelles shielded his body.

Luke Kermain, who was charged with the care of the horses, was standing before them without shelter from the bullets.

By his side was Bertha, whose anguish had made her forget Steel-arm's recommendations.

At the moment when Vandelles bent to avoid a blow which Goliath was aiming at him and at the same time to give Shanty an opportunity of shooting the giant, Benito and Domingo came from the ditch.

Their clothes hung in tatters and the blood covered their features and hands from the scratches which the briars and bushes had made.

Supple and agile as wild cats, the two crept almost up to Shanty across the trees and prickly shrubs.

Both at the same time rushed upon the Irishman.

A piercing cry from Bertha warned the latter of the danger.

He hastily turned, but he was too late.

Benito's machete struck Paddy before he had time to parry the blow.

The Irishman had, by turning, saved his life, for instead of being stabbed between his two shoulders, the machete only cut his left arm.

Notwithstanding his wound, Shanty with the other hand clutched his adversary around the body.

Domingo came to his comrade's help. Vandelles and Ribonne reunited all their strength against Goliath.

"Will you let a man be murdered by two wretches?" whispered Bertha in Kermain's ear. "If you are afraid, let me pass."

"Afraid!" repeated the German.

Then, giving way to impulse against which he had long struggled, he rushed at Domingo.

The latter turned and raised his navaja, but he received in his stomach a butt from the German which made him roll against Benito's legs.

"Take care!" cried Luke to Benito, with a sort of chivalry which would not allow him to attack a man in the rear.

The vaquero turned, and as Kermain came running on, he grasped him by his long yellow hair. As he fell, Luke threw his two arms around Benito's body, and clung to him, endeavoring to throw him down.

Obliged to defend himself against Shanty, the vaquero could not strike the little German with his machete.

"Benito," shouted Goliath, "courage, I am coming."

Then, with two swings of his rifle he struck Ribonne, who fell senseless, and Vandelles, who was wounded on the shoulder, and Goliath rushed upon the Irishman.

At the same instant, Pablo arrived to the aid of his companions.

Goliath threw a rapid glance around him and saw that no hopes of his success existed.

Of all the band Benito and Domingo alone were able to fight. Against them were Pablo, Cradle, Shanty, Kermain and Vandelles who had already risen.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOM SMITHSON.

With a single glance, Goliath saw the state of affairs.

He made up his mind, and rushed forward with such fury that with one blow Shanty and Benito fell; the latter naturally brought Luke down with him in his tumble.

Then the giant with a bound caught Bertha and held his bowie-knife over her bosom.

"If you move a finger against me, she dies!" cried he.

"Hold!" said Pablo to his friends in a trembling voice.

"Let me pass," added he.

And he glided along the sides of the ravine till he was before Goliath.

"Ha! ha! who's boss of the shop now?" said Tom with a savage laugh. "Tell your comrades to keep their distance, Steel-arm, and not to touch their guns—for, by the living God, this woman dies before me."

Pablo was in such anguish that he could scarcely speak.

"What wish you?" inquired he of the American.

"I want you to let us (my brother and I) go without being harmed."

"Promise on your side not to attack us."

"Of what use is the word of a man like me?" retorted the other, laughing. "I also want my rifle which is near that Patlander."

"To use it against us?"

"I want it."

"So be it," said Pablo, who thought the rifle was empty and that he would have time to shoot him before the giant could reload it. "You have my word."

"Not so—my brother and my rifle first."

"Do not do that, Steel-arm," said Cradle, "he will impose new conditions."

"Content yourself with my word," said Pablo; "there is not a man in all the Land of Gold who dares to doubt it."

"That is possible, but I distrust it—Do not stir," said he brutally to Bertha, who slightly moved her arm.

"You hurt the lady," said Pablo, becoming pale as death.

"Bah! I'll hurt her more if you do not consent. My bowie-knife shall go the hilt in her heart, I swear to you."

"Listen," said Steel-arm; "by my soul, I swear to you, that if aught of harm come to this lady, I will cut you and your brother to bits and roast you at a fire!"

There was such an accent of fury and resolution concentrated in Pablo's voice as he pronounced the words, that Goliath felt them chill the very marrow of his bones.

"I accept your word in exchange for the liberty of this woman," began the giant in a surly tone; "what guarantee have I that your companions will obey the conditions you accept?"

"I will guarantee it—for I will blow out the brains of the first one who tries to attack you."

"You leave us our horses, our weapons, and provisions?"

"I promise."

Tom hesitated a moment.

He finally released Bertha and sheathed his knife.

"Thanks, Pablo," said the young woman, visibly touched by the pain she saw impressed upon the Californian's features, but sorrowful at the fruits of her imprudence.

If she had followed, in fact, Pablo's advice and remained behind the horses, the Californian would have had time to stop Goliath before he could reach her.

"Pass behind me," said Pablo, with eyes sparkling with joy, "and remain in the midst of us."

"My brother?" said Goliath, as Steel arm handed him his rifle.

"We bring him to you," said Cradle.

Then, he added in a low tone to Vandelles:

"Tell Steel-arm that Philip is dead. Tell him to be on his guard when Goliath sees the body."

An instant after, Philip Smithson's corpse passed from hand to hand to Steel-arm.

Put upon his guard by Cradle's advice, he silently passed Philip's corpse to the other Smithson, taking care to have his rifle ready.

Tom took his brother, laid him upon the ground, and leaned over him.

Seeing that he remained motionless, he placed his hand upon Philip's breast.

The heart had ceased beating.

Philip was dead.

Tom rose with a bound and roared with fury.

"Dead!" cried he, "dead! You have slain him!"

Then, seizing his gun by the barrel, he rushed upon Pablo.

The latter stood firmly, with his rifle in hand, awaiting his approach.

"Another step, and you die," said he to the giant.

"You have deceived me."

"I did not know your brother was dead. Besides—"

"Oh, I could kill you all!" interrupted Goliath, in his transports of rage. "My brother! my poor brother!"

He threw himself upon Philip's body, and embraced it, weeping.

Though the two men were miscreants, stained with all crimes, Tom's despair was so profound that it even moved his enemies.

They dwelt silent and motionless, respecting his sorrow for his brother—his affection for him being perhaps his only human sentiment.

"Would you like us to help you dig your brother's grave?" asked Steel-arm.

"No," replied the giant in a ferocious tone, "I wish nothing from you. Be all cursed!"

He slung his rifle on his back, lifted his brother's body to his shoulders, and strode away.

Pablo and Shanty followed him, thinking that he might stampede the horses.

Frightened at the tumult and reports of the fire-arms, the animals had taken refuge about two hundred paces off, in a place a little roomier than the Canada.

Goliath approached his mustang.

He put Philip's corpse across the saddle, and secured it with a thong; then, bestriding another steed which bent beneath his enormous weight, he drove Philip's mustang before him, to the bridle of which he tied a lasso, and with which he guided the animal as with a long rein.

"Be cursed—cursed!" cried he, turning in the saddle to hurl this imprecation upon his foes.

Steel-arm and Shanty looked after him till he was gone from their view; then they drove the horses together.

When they were about to drive them to their friends, they saw the miners move towards them.

"What is it now?" inquired Pablo, running to his comrades.

"Nothing new," replied Cradle, who was at their head. "Only, we thought we would be more at our ease here to question the prisoners and to finish with them. There, you know, there can be but two stand abreast."

"What, have you prisoners?" Pablo exclaimed.

"Two, without counting the women," replied Cradle, who spoke with difficulty.

Pablo then perceived that the American spat blood at almost every word.

"It is nothing," said Cradle, anticipating the question which Pablo was about to address him. "That Goliath struck my breast such a blow as would have broken in two one less solid than mine; but I have received worse than this, and got over it."

"And Jose?" inquired Steel-arm, who vainly sought for the Mexican amid his companions.

"The poor fellow is dead, or nearly so," replied Vandelles. "My wife is with him at present."

"Let me pass," said Pablo, "I will see him. We can attend to the prisoners afterwards."

The miners separated to give him room and followed him almost to where the poor Mexican was lying.

Madam Vandelles and Luke Kermain were by the dying man.

Bertha held Jose's head upon her knees, while Luke sustained the body.

"Jose," said Pablo, leaning near the Mexican and taking his hand.

Jose half opened his eyes already fixed and glazed, and made an effort to look at the Californian.

"Steel-arm," murmured he.

"Yes, Jose, yes, it is I, my poor friend. What can I do for you?"

Jose feebly shook his head.

"Nothing," responded he, "I am wounded; in an hour—"

He could not finish; but Pablo comprehended too well what he meant.

"Hope still," said the Californian.

"No," returned Guerino. "You will have masses said for me?"

"I promise it. Half of your share which I promised you for the expedition shall be consecrated for that, unless you have some one else who will take it."

"I have a child, Pablo."

"Where?"

"At Tehuantepec, with my wife's sister."

"The name of that sister?"

"Juanito Osario."

"Well. I shall do as I have promised. Have you nothing else to ask?"

"No, Pablo—give my horse and machete to—" and he pointed to Luke Kermain, who had taken great care to alleviate his pains.

There came a moment of silence.

The wounded man made many efforts to speak, but he had not the power.

At last they heard him mutter:

"Have pity—pardon me—"

He stammered two or three unintelligible words, and uttered a deep sigh—his last.

He was dead.

"Poor Jose," said Pablo covering his face with his hands, "he was brave and devoted. Peace to him!"

The miners bowed with heart-felt grief.

Though too much disposed to turn all which concerned religion into ridicule, Vandelles and Ribonne felt their weakness before the gloomy majesty of death, and humbly bent their heads like their comrades.

In the midst of general silence a hole was dug in which was deposited the Mexican's body.

They covered the corpse with branches and stones, to shelter it from wild beasts.

This sad ceremony accomplished, Cradle reminded the others that there remained a duty of another sort to be finished.

"Now that poor Jose is buried," said he, "we must do justice to his assassins!"

"Wait," replied Steel-arm, "We cannot encamp in this place. A mile farther, we will find a place larger, where we can make a circle and raise the tents."

"Let us go, then," cried Ribonne.

"Watch the prisoners well," added Steel-arm.

"Be easy, I will take good care of them," returned Cradle.

They all took up the march to reach the place indicated by Steel-arm. It was a sort of semi-circle formed by a natural slope of the left side of the cañada.

"We will pass the night here," said Pablo. "Prepare the supper."

"Do you know that if the Indians attack us in this place we will be caught as in a trap?" observed Cradle.

"There is no other way," replied Steel-arm. "It will take nearly six hours to get out of this defile. Our wounded are incapable of travel. The others are tired."

"That is true," said Cradle, "but I would give something to be out of this cursed ravine."

"And I also," cried Ribonne.

"Suppose we begin by getting rid of these bandits who killed Jose?" remarked the Irishman, whose "chum" Jose had been.

"Hang them!" cried Cradle and Vandelles.

"Try them first," said Pablo.

The gold-hunters seated themselves upon the grass.

They formed a sort of half-circle and were arranged somewhat like the members of a jury.

In the centre was Steel-arm.

They brought before them Benito and Domingo, whom Cradle and Shanty had securely bound at the end of the combat, and whom they made march before them, not without administering sundry blows from the butt-ends of their guns at each suspicious movement.

Benito was utterly incapable of escape, not only from his bonds, but from his wounds also.

At the instant Goliath had taken his flight, the capataz, remaining almost alone against his adversaries, and already wounded, had attempted to throw himself into the ditch.

Shanty had struck him such a blow upon the legs with his gun that Benito had fallen, crying out that his leg was broken.

Although the hurt was less serious than he had supposed, yet his knee was swollen so badly that he could not have walked for a quarter of an hour.

He besides had lost much blood from his other wound, and nothing but his energy sustained him.

Nevertheless, his mien was haughty and arrogant as he stood before his judges.

Domingo, wounded also, but slightly, had taken a contrite and penitent bearing.

Steel-arm suspected the motive of Bertha's abduction; he thought in fact, of the effect which would be produced upon Vandelles if Benito replied, as was probable:

"I took Madam Vandelles because Steel-arm loved her; I hoped you would stop to seek the young woman."

This reflection made Pablo shudder.

As he examined the insolent smile of Benito, the Californian anticipated the latter's answer, enchanted at discord being thrown among his vanquishers.

But how was Pablo to avoid this reply? Pablo in vain pressed his imagination for a means of delivering himself from this difficult position.

There was but one: to blow out his brains before the half-breed would have time to explain.

Steel-arm thought of this at first, but he was repugnant to strike a defenceless enemy, and, above all, Rosina's husband.

"I have already been the cause of much sorrow to her," said he; "that would be ill repaying her having saved my life."

While he thus hesitated, and mused with his head hidden in his hand, to the great astonishment of the miners, Cypriana was speaking briskly to her companions.

"Go," said she, "go, Donna Rosina, you can save us. Ask their pardon. This Steelarm will give it."

"Perhaps he will not pardon Benito," responded Rosina.

"Domingo's life must also be spared," cried Cypriana imperiously; "yes, Donna Rosina, it must—or—"

"Or?"

"Or I will tell Benito that I saw you cut the lasso and save the chief of his enemies. It will be better for you to let Benito perish with Domingo, for, if he loses his life, the first thing he will do when free will be to stab you at the instant."

"I would consent to die," said Rosina, covering with her hands her eyes full of tears, "if that would save Benito without my being obliged to ask it of Steel-arm."

"Why?"

"No matter."

"See, Steelarm rises," cried Cypriana. "In the name of the holy Virgin, Donna Rosina, save Benito and Domingo."

Rosina sighed and advanced towards Pablo, passing behind the miners; when near the Californian, she gently placed her hand upon his shoulder.

He turned abruptly.

"Rosina," muttered he.

"Benito is the father of my child," said the young woman. "By saving your life, I have caused his death. If he dies, I follow him to the grave. Pablo, I conjure you—"

The tears choked her utterance.

Steelarm took the young woman's hand, and gently shook it.

"I promise to spare Benito's life," said he.

"And Domingo's also?"

"Domingo's?"

"It must be done, Don Pablo. I swear it must. Ask me not wherefore, but take my word."

"Domingo shall live," said Steel-arm.

"Thanks," returned the Spaniard, almost entirely covering her form with her rebozo as she went away.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRISONERS.

"WELL?" inquired Vandelles, surprised at the leader's hesitation, "what have you decided upon?"

"To spare the life of the two men," responded Steelarm.

There was a murmur of discontent.

Pablo looked around with his calm and imperious look and all were silent.

"On leaving for this expedition," said Steel-arm, "all made propositions, and stipulated advantages for themselves. I alone, who guide you to a treasure which I could keep myself, have asked for nothing. Is it too much for me to claim the lives of those men?"

"No," finally replied the miners, notwithstanding their manifest dislike.

"What shall we do, then?" said Cradle.

This presented a great embarrassment.

To abandon Benito and Domingo, wounded as they were, was to give to certain death, them and Rosina, who would certainly not quit them.

Besides, they might fall into the hands of the Indians.

This offered another inconvenience, for they might acquaint the savages with their position and they would then be followed and slain.

Or, when they were released, they might find some miners who would second them in any attempt upon Steel-arm and his friends.

"Well?" repeated Vandelles.

"Let them go away a little distance," said Pablo, "so they cannot hear us. Good—that will do—let them remain there—now listen. If we do not kill those men there is but one other part to take."

"What?" asked Ribonne.

"To associate them in our expedition."

"In our profits?" cried all the miners indignantly.

"The reduction of your shares will not be so great as you suppose."

"How so?" inquired Vandelles.

"Poor Mundiaz being dead and leaving neither wife nor child, his share is free."

"To be divided amongst us," cried Cradle.

"And Kermain?" said Shanty.

"He will have a share also," replied Steel-arm.

"And the half share you promised Jose's child?" demanded Cradle.

"That is sacred. That shall be paid before the others."

"Then there remains nothing for us," grumbled the gold hunters.

"You will not think so at the result," continued Steel-arm. "Recollect that there are two less in our band. Besides you are almost all wounded. Many of you are wearied with traveling and fighting. If the Indians attack us now, as is very likely on hearing the reports of the guns, will it not be better to have a seventh or eighth of the treasure than to die at the moment of success?"

He spoke thus for some minutes.

Cradle was the first to be converted. Shanty and Vandelles were the most difficult to persuade.

The Irishman could not pardon the murder of Jose; the other the abduction of his wife.

Finally they gave in to the general idea, but with bad grace.

Shanty declared that he would never consent had it not been to please Steel-arm.

When every one had agreed, Pablo ordered the release of the two prisoners.

"Ask why they stole my wife," said Vandelles, who half suspected one of the motives which influenced the gambusino's conduct.

Pablo pretended not to hear him, and hastened to announce to the Mexicans the pardon that was granted and the favor which was added.

Wounded though he was and stiff with the bonds he had had upon him, Domingo bounded with joy at Pablo's words.

"Long life to Steel-arm," cried he. "May heaven preserve the king of the placers."

Benito received Pablo's words more coldly.

Suspicious and jealous, he sought for the secret motive of this indulgence.

He thought that Pablo's fear that he might tell Vandelles why he had taken the young woman away had something to do with Steel-arm's resolution, but he was astonished, at the same time, that the latter had not taken the plan, the most simple one, of disembarassing himself of all revelations by a pistol-shot or cut of a machete.

In the Californian's place Benito would certainly not have hesitated to put such a means into speedy execution.

Notwithstanding all the suppositions of the capataz, life seemed such a gift that he could not but accept it, no matter who the donor.

He thanked Steel-arm with that dignity which may be found in the lowest Spanish or Mexican mendicant.

"Another word," began Pablo. "The only thing which I ask of you, in exchange for the pardon we accord you, is the promise of being with us faithful comrades and to conform like the others to my will. Swear it."

"On my two hands," said Domingo, raising his arms, "on these two hands, in which I hope soon to see a good piece of *cecina* or *tasafo*."

"And you, Benito?"

"I also," replied the half-breed with more circumspection, "I also, for in your hands I know I will be treated as with caballeros."

On hearing this reply, Pablo's lips parted with a distrustful smile.

"Benito," said he looking fixedly at the capataz, "let all be forgotten. Let there be no more of what happened before this day—at the time when we were enemies. The union between us is necessary to the success of the undertaking. We almost touch the design of our efforts. Let nothing come henceforth to trouble our good feeling or bring discord amongst us."

"You are right, Don Pablo," replied the capataz, replying to the piercing glance of the gambusino by a look of intelligence. "For my part, I will say nothing more."

While Steel-arm was thus enrolling Benito and Domingo, Bertha approached Rosina.

Since she had recognized the pretty Spaniard, she had endeavored to speak with her, but Rosina had always seemed to avoid her former friend.

Bertha, walking to her, took her hand.

"Have you not recollected me, Rosina?" said Madam Vandelles tenderly.

The Spaniard murmured a few words and lowered her eyes to keep from meeting Bertha's looks.

"Why shun me, then?" said the latter.

Rosina did not reply.

"Come," continued Bertha, "seat yourself here and let us converse. Do not turn your eyes away so, or I will think I have offended you."

Unable to resist the seduction of that affectionate voice, Rosina silently sat down by Bertha's side.

"What have you been doing since I quitted the Hacienda of San Fernando. Many times I have thought of you and your friends. I can never forget the cordial welcome I received and the many favors I received from their hands."

Rosina sighed but said nothing.

"How is your mother?" inquired Bertha.

After what Steel-arm had informed her of in San Francisco, and the events which had occurred at San Fernando, Bertha knew a great deal of all the events in which Rosina was concerned, but she preferred Rosina to be ignorant of that circumstance.

"Will you not speak to me, Rosina?" began Bertha again, after an instant's silence; "what have I done?"

This time her voice touched the Spaniard's heart.

Rosina burst into tears.

"I am unhappy," said she.

Then, unable to resist her emotion, she pillowed her head upon Bertha's shoulder.

"Your husband ill-treats you?" inquired Madam Vandelles.

"My husband!" cried the young woman raising her eyes.

"Is not Benito your husband?"

Rosina raised her head and for an instant regarded Bertha with a sort of distrust; but, her expression denoted so much interest and compassions that the Spaniard forgot all her jealous suspicions.

For a long while, she had not conversed with open heart with another woman.

Her secret burned her heart.

Besides she felt the need of justifying herself before Bertha.

"I have much to mourn, Bertha," said she finally. "Heaven punished me cruelly for having given way to a moment of despair. I will tell you all. Leave your hand in mine, but do not look upon me, or I cannot continue my tale of grief."

Bertha passed an arm around the waist of the Spaniard, who commenced her recital in a tremulous voice.

"You know," said Rosina, "that I was to marry Don Pablo Verrers, I loved him with all my soul, and I think he partook of my affection.—I am sure that for a while he loved me—before your arrival, Bertha—that time I cursed you!"

"You know, Rosina—"

"I well knew that it was not your fault," interrupted the Spaniard closing her mouth. "But I suffered so much! He looked more at you—he forever followed you—when I saw his eyes fixed upon you with that expression, so tender and so passionate—oh! pardon me! but I wished to kill you. I was mad—I doubted yet—I doubted my evidence—though I felt certainty tear my heart."

"One day Pablo was obliged to go to his mother who was dying. I am ashamed to say it, but I hoped that on his return he would have forgotten you. Some days after your husband came in your search; with what joy—"

"You saw me depart, do you mean?" finished Madam Vandelles, seeing that the Spaniard stopped suddenly. "Say it, Rosina, I too well comprehend what passed in your heart. You hated the stranger who destroyed all your dreams of happiness."

"I waited impatiently for Pablo's return," continued the young woman. "One day finally I saw him arrive. He was still far off—I was happy, I thanked

heaven! He was mounted upon his fine gray steed, which galloped like the wind to the hacienda.

"My mother is dead!" said he.

"We did our best to console him. While we were all speaking, he looked about."

"Where is Madam Marel?" asked he finally.

"She has gone," said I; "her husband came for her."

"He was pale as death."

"Her husband," repeated he.

"Yes."

"I thought him dead."

"Her husband had left her to go to the placers; they thought him dead, but it was an error."

"He said nothing more, but rose almost instantly. He went out. I threw myself weeping into my mother's arms."

"Suddenly I heard the furious gallop of a horse. I ran to the window, but Pablo had almost disappeared."

"Stefano, who was by, was following him with his eyes with a stupefied air."

"Where is he going?" inquired I of Stefano.

"Heaven alone knows," replied he. "I think his mother's death has driven him mad."

"What did he say to you?"

"He asked what road Mr. and Mrs. Marel had taken."

"Did you tell him?"

"Yes. He threw me a piece of gold, spurred his horse and went off at full speed."

"I do not know what I replied. I was broken-hearted, abandoned. I went to my chamber, wrote a note for Pablo, and left it upon the table; I ran to throw myself into the lake on which Pablo and I had so often happily sailed."

She stopped abruptly.

"Ah! why did I not that day die!" suddenly cried the Spaniard despairingly. "Do not look at me," continued she; "let me finish in your arms. There was at my father's house a capataz named Benito."

"Benito?"

"Yes, Benito—I had often noticed him—but with scarcely any attention. Could I have supposed that he loved me—a half-breed—a half-breed," repeated she.

"Benito saw me run to the lake—he rushed after me, and saved me—saved me!" cried she gloomily.

She stopped again.

"No," said she, "I cannot finish Bertha."

"I understand it all, poor dear child," said the latter, pressing the Spaniard to her heart. "Oh! the miscreant!"

"For many months I was mad," continued Rosina. "I was taken to the house of Benito's mother in Monterey. I repulsed him. He wept. I replied to his prayers and supplications only with reproaches and tears; I wished to go. Benito no doubt thought I would kill myself. He seized me and led me back to the hut where his mother had attended me during my long sickness. Five months after, my little child—is he not pretty?" continued she, interrupting herself, and pointing to the child who slept near her in a little cradle. "Poor child! Do you know what name I have given him, Bertha?"

"No," replied the young woman, who had a presentiment of the name.

"He is called Pablo," murmured the Spaniard, "Pablo—it seems to me that that name would make me love it more—all my heart is concentrated upon him. Scarcely had I recovered than Benito's mother, who had been very good to me, died. Benito then thought of the gold mines. All places were the same to me, and I consented to whatever he liked."

"Some days after we started for the placers. We lost our way, and Benito joined three vaqueroes and a sailor who had run away from his ship, whom we found in a posada. The sailor was killed by the kick of a wild horse which he attempted to ride. Two of the vaqueroes, Ramon and Nieto were slain by your friend, Domingo is the third."

There was silence.

Rosina wept, her head leaning upon Bertha's shoulder.

In the midst of the sincere and profound sorrow which inspired her, Bertha felt a sort of selfish contentment that Rosina's position rendered the sacrifice of her own love for Pablo useless.

Bertha did not confess the thought, but she experienced from her own heart enough to reproach herself with it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BENITO.

FOR some instants, Benito had been prowling around the two young women, whom he observed with a jealous and uneasy eye.

They saw that he hesitated to interrupt their interview.

"Benito awaits you," said Bertha in a low tone to Rosina.

The latter made a gesture of impatience and scorn.

"He is wounded," continued Bertha; "and then he is——"

She could not finish.

Rosina raised her head and fixed her large black eyes upon Madam Vandelles. By a susceptibility which her griefs had caused, she always dreaded a reproach, humiliation, or raillery.

This time again, all her suppositions vanished under her companion's frank and affectionate look.

"He is the father of my child, you mean?" murmured she. "You are right, Bertha. And *he*," added she after a moment's silence; "*he* loves you always, does he not?"

It was now Bertha's turn to lower her eyes.

"I saw him an hour ago," continued Rosina. "While Goliath held the point of his bowie-knife over you, Pablo trembled through all his limbs. Then he looked upon you at times! You are not the mistress of a half-breed, Bertha," added she bitterly.

"I am the wife of another," murmured Bertha.

"What matters that? At least he cannot scorn you. Ah! you are indeed happy!"

"Happy," murmured Bertha, "happy! Oh! Rosina, I also have cruel sorrows."

"Sad—and he loves you. He speaks often of his love, I suppose?"

"Never."

"Never?" repeated Rosina, surprised, "that is impossible; Bertha, you deceive me——"

"I swear to you that, since our departure from San Francisco, he has not addressed to me one word of love."

"When you are alone, though."

"We are never together, Pablo speaks to me less."

"Does he love you no longer?" cried the Spaniard.

A flash of pride came from Bertha's eyes.

Rosina comprehended that her companion felt herself to be still loved.

"You Europeans know not how to love," murmured the Spaniard with a sort of sad disdain.

"Rosina," called Benito to her, as he approached walking painfully.

Rosina frowned.

Nevertheless, she quitted Bertha, after making her swear to keep a profound secrecy upon what she had told her.

She immediately joined the capataz. The latter was seated upon the grass. "What did you tell that woman?" inquired he suspiciously.

"I told her my life," said she calmly, seating herself near him.

With that instinct of charity which is cherished in every female heart, Rosina attempted to bind up Benito's wound.

He repulsed the young woman's hand roughly.

"For what good?" said Benito bitterly. "Leave me; I can alone attend to my wound. A white woman like you makes too great a sacrifice in deigning to touch a half-breed—the more so, when he is her husband."

"Do not speak thus, Benito," replied she, "you see that I make no reproach and do it cheerfully."

"Demonio!" cried the capataz.

As if she had not heard him, she bent over Benito, took his arm, and arranged the bandage skillfully.

"You must be well acquainted with that lady, to reveal our secrets."

"I am."

"Where did you see her?"

"At San Fernando."

"How then, did you know her husband?"

"I also saw him at San Fernando."

"Capa de Dios! why did you tell me the contrary?"

"So as not to excite your jealousy. Now that you have seen me with his wife, you cannot be angry."

"And the other, this Steel-arm?"

"I knew him also—his true name is Pablo Verrers."

"Pablo Verrers!" cried Benito, starting. "Is he the man who loved you?"

"Yes—what of him?"

"What of him, caramba! I will bury my navaja in the cursed dog's heart."

"He is too strong for you," retorted Rosina. "Besides, it is not me he loves, but Madame Vandelles."

"You deceive me!"

"Ask all his companions."

"No matter," said Benito, "one of us two is too much in this world. When I have strength enough to hold my machete, I will kill this Pablo."

Rosina did not reply.

"Voto al Demonio!" cried the half-breed, striking the ground with his clenched fist. "Let me tell you that I shall slay you if I learn that you have agreed with this Pablo to deceive me."

"I have seen what I have said."

"And are you right?"

There was in her expression such a willingness to give up life that Benito's anger broke against this indifference.

He lowered his hand, and, as was his habit, a re-action operated in his passionate mind.

"She would not deceive me," thought he. "It would poorly repay her frankness."

Five minutes after, he was upon his knees before the young woman, supplicating her to pardon his violence.

The following day, towards three o'clock in the afternoon, the gold-hunters finally left the canada and found themselves in the open country.

Around them extended an immense plain.

Before them, in the far-off horizon, rose the jagged crests of some mountains.

"See the Sierra of the Tatecas," said Pablo. "On the other side of them is the placer."

The miners uttered a joyful cheer.

"Do not rejoice too soon," continued Steel-arm, "we have much to do yet. It will take us four days to reach the foot of the mountain and to ascend it.

That is the most perilous part of our enterprise."

"Why so?"

"There is no road, and the soil is very listressing for horses."

"We can manage it," said Ribonne.

"Then if there are Indians in the neighborhood, it is evidently in that place they lie in ambush."

"Bah!" said Vandelles, "we are too near our prize to be stopped now. While I have before my eyes the place where a fortune is to be got, I think five hundred of the red devils could not stop me."

"Nor us either!" cried the other gold-diggers.

Pablo replied but with giving the signal of departure.

He was far from partaking of the general confidence. That which most inquieted him was the composition of the little troop and the scarcity of any binding qualities between them.

One word would destroy the union.

An access of jealousy from Rosina or from Benito, a mistake of Ribonne or Shanty, one moment of Vandelles' rage, a quarrel between the two vaqueroes and their former enemies, would be more than sufficient to place them, with weapons in their hands, against each other.

And when in the mines, once that the gold was dug from the bowels of the earth, and the yellow reflections of the precious metal had kindled the flame of cupidity and covetousness, would they then act justly?

Notwithstanding their obedience to Pablo's orders, and despite the oath they had sworn on departing, the other miners saw with jealousy the enormous share of Vandelles.

Forgetting on what condition they had been admitted within the association, they would regard themselves as cheated if Vandelles claimed more than his companions.

Steel-arm too well knew the men not to foresee the result, but he could do nothing.

He had accepted the men with their faults and must be contented to be always upon his guard as much against dissensions of his friends as against the attacks of his enemies.

On the other hand, if the Indians were near, they must sooner or later observe the traces of the gold-finders.

The question was, whether they would be of a friendly or hostile tribe.

The latter was, unfortunately, the most probable answer.

Then, if Goliath should, in returning to San Francisco, encounter upon his way some of the adventurers who then swarmed in California, vengeance and thirst for gold would decide the giant to conduct the new allies to the placer of the Desierto.

Notwithstanding all these serious ideas, the thought of Bertha was absolute in reigning over Steel-arm's heart.

On her side, Bertha was troubled and uneasy.

She was incessantly tormented by Pablo's persistence in keeping from her. She asked herself if Rosina's presence had not something to do with his reserve. It required but a word to make her love to be exposed and to reveal to Pablo the passion which so long had responded to his own.

As for Cypriana, fallen from her position of Rosina's confidant by Madam Vandelles' meeting her, she hated Bertha with all her power, and waited but for an occasion to show it.

Benito had the same thought of vengeance in respect to Steel-arm.

Shunned somewhat by the other miners from the mixed blood that ran in his veins, he from habit kept with Domingo, and sometimes Luke Kermain.

The latter, for whom Shanty experienced a sincere friendship, journeyed always with the Irishman.

As the latter never left Bertha, near whom Rosina constantly was, Luke often was by the side of the two ladies.

The Irishman, only taking care of Bertha, whose mare he led in the most difficult places, Luke found himself naturally Rosina's protector and in a few days became an attentive and faithful escort for the young Spaniard.

Benito more than once looked in such a manner upon the German that Rosina thought that she might discover his sentiments by a remark.

"You are not jealous of him, are you," said Rosina one night.

"No, I too well know whom you love. I keep all my jealousy for him, and——"

"And—what?" inquired she, on his stopping abruptly.

"Nothing," returned he, stifling the words of hatred and revenge he almost pronounced.

The eighth day, at noon, they arrived at the base of the Sierra Tatecas.

It was agreed that they should stop at this place for repose and that they were to commence the ascension, the next day at sunrise.

"To-morrow evening," said Pablo, around when the gold-seekers pressed, "if Heaven permits us to ascend the mountain without accident, to-morrow evening we will perceive the site of the Rio del Desierto and the rocks which enclose the veins of gold."

CHAPTER XIX.

EL PENON DEL DESIERTO.

BETWEEN Deer's River, and Mill's River, both of which empty into the Sacramento, the Sierra Tatecas extends its heights, crowned with thick forests of pines.

Towards the middle of its range, the mountain changes its direction and describes a sort of obtuse angle with the opening towards the Sacramento.

In this portion rocks of strange, rugged, and grotesque aspects, are scattered around amidst the trees.

A hundred yards farther, towards the stream, is the Penon del Desierto.

One would say that some terrible natural convulsion had torn this hill from the sides of the mountains and cast it forward.

The declivity of the penon opposed to the angle of the mountain offers no other vegetation than shrubs and stunted cedars projecting here and there from between the rocks of slate and quartz.

On the other side, on the contrary, trees of every description, and, especially magnificent pines, toss their verdant summits towards the sky.

The valley, which commences at the foot of the penon and extends along the length of the sierra, is watered by numerous water-courses which, during winter, descend the mountain in foaming torrents.

One of these streams leaves the summit of the Sierra Tatecas, precisely at the angle of which we have spoken, descends upon the plateau and winds around following all the sinuosities of the base of the mountain.

It finally falls into the valley and joins the other rivulets.

The passages by which one descends the sierra to the valley is so deeply sunk between the rocks and gigantic trees, that the penon cannot be perceived till one reaches the foot of the mountain.

The road (we will give it this name, in default of another term) issues into the valley in advance of the penon.

To reach the plateau we have before mentioned, one must consequently ascend

the declivity of the penon and descend finally the other side.

Eight days after the deaths of Philip Smithson, and poor Jose Guerino, the miners conducted by Steel-arm, finally entered the valley.

"Behold Penon del Desierto," said Pablo as they came within sight of the hill.

At these words, every man forgot his fatigue.

They all hastened to scramble up the penon and at the end of a quarter of an hour of exertion, they perceived the plateau.

"Let us halt and rest ourselves an instant," said Pablo.

"Rest!" cried Vandelles, "when we are within two steps of the wealth you have promised us."

"Wait a few minutes for me, at least. I must explore the ground."

"I will accompany you," said Vandelles.

"No, I wish to be alone."

He slowly descended towards the plateau.

When there, he cast his eyes about him as if he was searching for some guide.

Soon he walked straight to a little rock of quartz whose point alone cropped out from the ground.

At the end of five minutes, and without other tool than his barreta, Pablo had made a hole of a foot or two deep around the rock.

At this depth the earth, red till then, took a greyish tint like ashes.

Steel-arm for some time examined the rock, then he vigorously attacked it with his barreta.

By the third stroke, he knocked off a sliver of the quartz which he took up and placed in his pocket.

Then he remained a little while motionless, leaning upon the iron-tipped staff with his eyes fixed as if he was plunged into deep revery.

"Of what is he thinking?" demanded the gold-hunters, who followed all of the gambusino's movements with the utmost anxiety.

Finally, Pablo raised his head and passed his hand across his brow, as if he would chase away painful ideas.

He threw a last inquiring look around him and turned to his companions.

"Well?" cried at the same time Ribonne, Vandelles and Domingo.

"The bonanza is before you," replied Pablo almost solemnly.

"Hurrah for Steel-arm!"

"Don Pablo forever!"

"Viva Steel-arm!"

"Long life to the king of the placers!"

In their enthusiasm, they threw their hats into the air and laughed and cried like children.

"Does the piece of quartz you broke off contain gold?" inquired Cradle.

"Yes," returned the gambusino.

He turned at the same time to Madam Vandelles.

Doffing his hat, with a gesture full of grace and dignity, he bent his knee before the young woman, and offered her the fragment of quartz, which sparkled with innumerable pyrites of gold.

"Lady," said Pablo, "permit to offer you the first fruits of this placer. May it be as rich as I desire, and may its result amply repay all the dangers and fatigues which you have braved to reach it."

"I thank you, Don Pablo," murmured Bertha.

"Wait!" cried Steel-arm, arresting the miners, who already were rushing to the plateau with a barrete or pick axe in hand.

But, devoured with impatience and curiosity, they again rushed in the direction of the placers.

Cypriana had followed Rosina, whom

Benito had carried, that he might display to her the gold which he had so long dreamed of for her.

Bertha and Pablo remained alone.

A sad smile hovered upon the Californian's lips as he saw the miners precipitate themselves to the gold.

He turned abruptly, surprising Bertha's eyes fixed upon his own with an expression of acknowledgment.

The two exchanged a long look.

Bertha silently held out her thin hand to the Californian, who took it within his own with deep emotion.

"Thanks, Pablo," said she, "thanks."

"I am well paid," replied he, with a deep, profound feeling of happiness.

"How can I ever repay you?" finally said Bertha after a minute's silence.

Pablo answered by a look which, with its passionate intensity, penetrated to her heart.

Madam Vandelles lowered her eyes and placed her hand upon her bosom to compress the tumult of feelings struggling there.

Urged by his love, but restrained by the fear of claiming the price of the service he had rendered, Pablo still contemplated Madam Vandelles. Finally, he could not resist the sentiments which contested in his breast.

"Bertha!" cried he, seizing her hand, she making but a feeble resistance against him, "Bertha——"

At this very instant, Rosina, who had retraced her steps, came running to the two lovers.

She seated herself by the side of Bertha, who listened to her without attention, for her thoughts were elsewhere.

Pressing his burning brow between his hands, Pablo gazed on the two females with a thoughtful eye.

"Oh! if I could read Bertha's heart as I can Rosina's!" said the Californian. "Is it love or gratitude which now brightens her eyes?"

The gold-diggers were scattered upon the plateau, from time to time uttering joyous cheers.

In raising his eyes to the sky, Pablo perceived that the sun had crossed two-thirds of its course.

"If you are rested, will you now descend upon the plateau?" he asked Bertha and Rosina.

The two followed him.

At a moment when Pablo extended his hand to Madam Vandelles to aid her in a difficult place, she said in a low tone:

"Give your hand to poor Rosina."

"After you," replied he in the same tone; "you first."

"No," returned Bertha, "she first—for me," added she, still lower, with a smile and in a tone which made Pablo start for joy.

"I obey," said Steel-arm, stopping for Rosina.

The latter at first repulsed his succor, but, as he insisted, she ended by accepting.

Then, instead of simply leaning upon his arm, she let herself glide within his arms as if worn out by fatigue, and not able to sustain herself.

Pablo was obliged to carry her for a few minutes.

She had thrown her arms around the young man's neck, and her large black eyes beamed upon those of Pablo.

Bertha, who turned to look at her companions, turned pale on seeing Rosina in Pablo's arms.

The latter could not see Madam Vandelles, but Rosina remarked the young woman's movement, and approached her pretty face nearer to Pablo, whose brow and cheeks were hidden by the Spaniard's hair.

On reaching Madam Vandelles, Pablo was struck by her pallor.

"You are not wounded?" asked he with deep feeling.

"It is nothing," responded she smiling. "I struck my foot against a tree."

"Do you suffer still?"

"No, Don Pablo, the pain is over."

Steel-arm's voice and eager looks had dissipated as by enchantment the sensation which Bertha had experienced on seeing Rosina in Pablo's arms.

Nevertheless, she took the Californian's arm and never quitted it until they attained the plateau.

The miners ran towards Steel-arm to show the different pieces of quartz studded with sparkling buttons of gold.

More experienced than the others, Cradle had collected a number of nuggets, one of which would weigh three or four ounces.

"That is enough for to-day," said Steel-arm.

"There is still four hours before dark," cried Ribonne.

"Yes," returned Steel-arm, "but we must accomplish a work more needed at present than digging gold."

"What?" cried the miners, who for a moment ceased to strike the rock with their tools.

"We must build a house. Where will we put our gold and our provisions? At any moment we may be discovered by the Indians. In a month or two, the miners will go to the placers, and the bushrangers will appear at the same time as them. A house will require seven or eight days of labor at most."

They immediately began their work. The cabins were erected against the mountain which defended them from the north wind.

They cut some young cedars for stakes, which they drove deeply into the ground, in the form of a parallelogram.

They planted a second range of stakes parallel to the first, at two feet distance from the latter.

Between the outside line and the inner one, they filled in stones to the height of a man. Strong branches, twisted and interlaced, served, with leaves, for the roof.

Benito's habitation, sheltered like Vandelles', was constructed similarly, but with less care.

Though Steel-arm had watched that nothing might be wanting, his companions, experiencing for Bertha both respect and affection, had exhibited much more zeal in arranging the young woman's residence than in that of Benito and Rosina.

The cabin which the other miners occupied, was placed near the Mexican couple's.

As for Pablo, he had constructed, with some poles and three buffalo skins, a sort of wigwam in front of the house of Madam Vandelles.

He took with him Luke Kermain.

Scarcely was the work fully terminated than the miners completely forsook them for the search of gold.

CHAPTER XX.

GOLD.

For the first five or six days, the product was enormous.

They found the gold almost like dust of the earth.

In less than a week, and, in spite of the inexperience of the laborers, they gathered nearly sixty pounds of the precious metal.

Encouraged by this unhopd-for success the miners worked with feverish ardor.

The process employed for the extraction of gold varies according to the nature of the earth which is operated upon.

In dry diggings, they crush the frag-

ments of rock and the auriferous ground. When this operation is terminated, the stone and dirt is dried in the sun to be pulverized anew. The dust is then placed in a sieve, which is shaken over a blanket put on the ground. The wind carries away the dirt, while the gold, being heavier, falls almost perpendicularly at the feet of the gold-finders.

Another method is as follows:

They two-thirds fill a *batea* (wooden bowl) with the auriferous earth. Then this bowl is plunged into a running stream, and shaken rapidly till the dirt has been carried away by the water. The gold falls to the bottom of the bowl at the same time as a black sand composed of iron and some earthy particles. The residue at the bottom of the bowl is dried in the sun, and the gold separated from the sand by the process of winnowing.

There is much practice required in the proper management of the *batea*.

Beginners allow much gold to escape with the dirt washed away by the current.

As to the implement called the cradle, we will give a short description of it.

As its name implies, it is similar to the domestic article of the same name.

The principal portion is furnished with a grate, which, when the sand is thrown upon it, suffers no stones to penetrate to the interior of the cradle. At the other end is a filter which permits the water and mud to escape, while the gold and sand fall, from their heaviness, to the bottom of the cradle.

This remainder is dried in the sun and winnowed, as in the foregoing processes.

Four men usually suffice for the management of a middling-sized cradle.

The first one breaks the earth or sand; the second carries it to the cradle and throws it upon the grating; the third rocks the cradle; and the last pours water constantly upon the grate.

For the first days, when the earth was but slightly to be broken to procure the precious metal, when they often came upon great nuggets, every one worked ardently; they scarcely thought of sleep and food.

Soon, though, when they were winnowing the dirt and pulverized quartz, they commenced to complain.

They would have been more courageous if laboring for their own account, but the great portion reserved for Vandelles rendered the other miners less laborious.

Vandelles himself set the bad example.

His natural indolence already appeared.

He tranquilly overlooked the others, smoking his pipe, absolutely as if he was disinterested in the result of their labors.

"Does he take us for niggers?" Cradle often muttered with true American independence.

The weight of the work reposed especially upon the American, who understood, better than his comrades, the management of the pick, and above all the handling of the instrument from which he had taken his surname.

Shanty aided him with his best, but he was not so skilful.

Benito and Domingo were naturally lazy, and never could remain two hours at their work.

As for Ribonne, he labored by starts, and never failed to go and chat with Vandelles as soon as the latter quitted his work.

From the nature of the earth and the hardness of the rock, it was very difficult to work the first stratum indicated by Steel-arm.

It is true that this bonanza already produced nearly twenty thousand dollars in a short time.

"We must employ powder," said Cradle; "that will be quicker."

"We must wait till the last moment

for that," said Pablo. "The reports would attract the Indians to us."

"And on that account," demanded Vandelles, "will we have to fold our arms?"

"Ah! no one understands that better than you!" cried Cradle, in a bitter tone.

"I will do so at any moment it pleases me," Vandelles retorted haughtily.

"But it also pleases everyone," continued the miner. "Do you think it is for your pleasure I work? If there is anyone who should work, it is you, and, d— your eyes, you look upon us all as if we were Carolina blacks!"

"I do as I please," said Vandelles.

"Enough," interrupted Pablo, in his imperious tone, "listen. The bonanza which now we are working, is not the richest of the penon. At the foot of the mountain, at the place where the torrent falls upon the plateau, there is deposited a quantity of *pepites* detached from the sides of the *serran*. It will be easy to collect, by washing or by the use of the cradle, this gold covered with a bed of sand. In that manner, you will equally avoid the inconvenience of the winnowing, and the dangers which accompany the use of powder."

A shout of joy hailed Steel-arm's communication.

The miners would have immediately rushed towards the bed of the torrent but Pablo stopped them.

"This time," said he, "I wish the labor to be regularly organized, and each one to have his share fixed in advance."

"Yes, yes!" cried Cradle, Shanty and the Mexicans.

"There will be four men to the cradle," continued Steel-arm. "They will change two by two; Vandelles, Ribonne, Shanty and Domingo will commence. Cradle and Benito will take the place of the two first, who, two hours afterwards, come in their turn to relieve Shanty and Domingo. Every two hours they change."

"And Luke?" inquired Cradle.

"Luke is not strong enough," replied Pablo, "but I am certain he will aid you with his best. I shall hunt, for some haunches of venison will be a great addition to our repasts."

"Certainly," said Ribonne. "I avow that I begin to grow weary of the smoked beef and ham which we have had since our arrival here."

"You are still too feeble to hunt, Don Pablo," said Shanty.

"When you are not here who is to appease the quarrels?" added Bertha in a low tone.

Pablo lowered his head for he felt all the justice of the observation.

"Well," said he, "Shanty and Vandelles who are the best shots among us, will be the hunters for our party."

"And who will cook?" inquired Cradle and Ribonne, evidently much interested in their question.

"Cypriana," replied Pablo; "Luke will cut wood, help in the heavy work, and take care of the horses."

The following day was Sunday.

In spite of Vandelles and Ribonne, both systematically opposed to anything partaking of a religious sentiment, it was decided that they should repose on the Lord's day.

Steel-arm well knew, apart from its other tendencies, the effect which a day of rest would have upon the health of the gold-hunters.

Vandelles and Ribonne took their guns and went off with Shanty for the chase.

Still enfeebled by his injuries, Steel-arm could not accompany them.

Divided between his love for the chase and his jealousy, Benito ended by his remaining at the camp.

As for Domingo, his indolence was

such as to be too strong for other sentiments to struggle with it.

He profited by the Sunday to sleep upon the grass and smoke cigarettes.

Towards two o'clock in the afternoon, Cradle had determined to fish and, that occupation being without fatigue, the vaquero was enticed by it.

Re-assured by the slight attention which Pablo exhibited to Rosina, Benito decided also to follow his two companions, with the intention to return from time to time to see what was occurring upon the plateau.

As they fished but fifty yards from the camp, this act was an easy one.

Cypriana having followed Domingo, there remained upon the plateau but Bertha, Rosina, Steel-arm, and Luke Kermain.

The latter had accidentally struck his left foot with a pick axe, which prevented him walking for several days.

Pablo was seated at one of the extremities of the plateau, he was contemplating surrounding objects.

Bertha continually kept gazing upon him.

She remarked that he frequently wiped the sweat from his brow with his handkerchief, an action which proved more the state of his weakness than the heat.

For ten minutes at least, she sought pretext to approach Pablo.

After some hesitation, she took from her cabin a little flask of quinine, medicine which the miners never travel without; then she advanced to him.

CHAPTER XXI.

TREACHERY.

"You still have the fever, I am sure," said she to the Californian, assuming a careless air.

"No," replied he mechanically, more occupied in contemplating the features of her he loved than thinking of his condition.

"But yes," persisted she. "Give me your arm. Since there is no doctor in our band, I must do my best. You well know that I have already cured Cradle with my medicines."

"I know that you are an angel of goodness," replied Pablo, "and that your affectionate interest would alone suffice to cure a sick man."

"Good, but let the compliments come afterwards. Begin by obeying my orders. Give me your arm."

He held out his thin hand, which a woman might have envied for its elegance and delicacy.

"I see you have the fever," said the young woman, "your pulse has more than a hundred pulsations every minute. Take the quinine."

Pablo did not answer.

His eyes were fixed upon Bertha with passionate intoxication.

Under the fire of that regard, which she felt cross her cheeks, Madam Vandelles was sensible of her heart beating with such violence that she was obliged to lean against a tree.

"You suffer?" inquired Pablo, seeing her become pale.

"No," said she smiling; "but I am waiting for you to obey."

"Give it me," said the young man: "if it were poison I should be happy to take it from your hands."

"If it were poison," replied she, with one of those outbursts by which her heart was betrayed sometimes, "the other half—"

She stopped suddenly, blushing.

"The other half for me," was she about to add?

"Well?" asked Pablo.

"The other half should be for Shanty," said she, essaying a smile, "for he would certainly kill me on his return. He is so attached to you, the brave lad."

"Ah! was that your thought," said Steel-arm sadly.

"Yes, sir," replied Bertha, whose affected merriment could not conceal her emotion.

He lowered his head and said nothing.

This man, so clear-sighted when occupied with others, lost his penetration when acting for himself.

As the fever modifies all our physical sensations, love warped his judgement, and he doubted the interior voice which told him that he was loved.

"How do you feel now?" inquired Bertha at the end of some minutes of silence.

"Better," replied he, bending upon the young woman his eyes, still sad, but sparkling with love and acknowledgment, "much better since you are here."

"You suffer no more?"

"Oh! no, I am happy!"

"The doctor's presence always produces that effect," continued she smiling. "Now that you are cured, I leave you to your reflections and reveries."

"Do you already leave me?" said the Californian, who could not decide to release the little hand he felt trembling in his own.

"Stay," said she, denoting Rosina with a look, "she comes to meet us."

Unable to govern herself much longer, Rosina, indeed, advanced towards the two young people.

Pablo made a gesture of impatience, and Bertha could scarcely repress the vexation which this interruption caused her.

"Poor Rosina," said Madam Vandelles, with that affectionate compassion which a woman experiences for a slighted rival, "she loves you so much! Be good to her, Don Pablo, it is unfortunate to love without being loved."

"Oh! yes," muttered Pablo, "but perhaps there is something more cruel still. Suspended between heaven and hell—oh—"

"One must always think of heaven," quickly interrupted Bertha carried away by her emotion.

Then, confused by the words which escaped her, and which her conscience exaggerated still more in importance, she hastily disengaged her hand from Pablo's.

Nevertheless, rapid as was the movement the pressure of her fingers was felt by Steel-arm.

She turned away her head to avoid Pablo's eyes, beaming with love and gladness.

Rosina's arrival excused the Californian from replying.

Madam Vandelles and Steel-arm replied to Rosina's welcome in the most friendly and affectionate tone, but they scarcely knew what they were saying.

This the Spaniard perceived.

A bitter smile parted her lips red like the flower of the pomegranate.

Pablo suddenly arose with a bound seizing his rifle.

"Caspata! do not fire," cried Benito, who came from the wood, pale with that fright of fire-arms which is inspired in men of his race, brave though they may be otherwise.

"Why come you here?" inquired Steel-arm.

Benito told some story to excuse his presence and his arrival, but neither Pablo nor Rosina were his dupes.

Steel-arm seated himself.

The Spaniard turned her back upon Benito, and conversed with Kermain who had approached her.

Fortunately for the half-breed, who began, notwithstanding his rare im-

pudence, to be embarrassed, the hunters arrived five minutes after him.

They were without their horses, and therefore came on foot.

Their countenances expressed fatigue. We shall see what had happened them.

We will first state the conversation which had taken place between Benito, Domingo, Cradle, and Cypriana, and by what reason Benito had hidden in the wood as a spy upon Steel-arm and Rosina.

Cradle was almost as well skilled in fishing as in the digging of gold.

As fish, and the salmon trout chiefly, abounds in Californian waters, the American soon filled his basket.

Though less adroit than Cradle, Benito was very lucky.

As for Domingo, who was, like a lizard, extended upon the ground to fish with less weariness, he was half asleep.

A large trout, which bore away his line without a ceremony, awoke the vaquero by the shock it gave him.

"Caramba!" cried Domingo, rubbing his eyes with one hand, while his other was menacing the trout as its sides flashed in the current.

"Run after it, muchacho," said Benito, laughing.

"The road he goes is too wet."

"Call him back," said Cradle.

"He does not understand Spanish," retorted Domingo. "From his manners of acting, you can see he is a Yankee."

"In fact," said Cradle, "that is why he tricked you."

"Bah!" said Domingo. "He will be dead in ten minutes."

"Ah!" suddenly cried Cradle, struck with an idea, "where did you get your hook?"

"I found it in a box—"

"In my trunk?" asked Cradle.

"What is the penalty of stealing a new hook to be lost thus?"

"It's not my fault."

"Is it the fault of the fish? Whoever saw a man lie upon his belly, like a lizard in the sun, to catch a fish?"

"I am fatigued."

"And we have had hard work," said Benito, who could ride sixty leagues on horseback, but who could not be broken in to the labor of the placers.

"Hard work, certainly," repeated Domingo, stretching himself again in the sun at the feet of Cypriana, who had by degrees approached the fishers.

"If one worked for himself," said Benito.

"That would be better," added Cradle in his tranquil voice.

"Much better," muttered Domingo with a sigh.

"Much better," repeated Cypriana, who mingled in the conversation.

Once the discourse ran upon this interesting subject, it continued, especially supported by Benito and Domingo.

More reserved, at first from his natural character, and then because he feared that some treachery would betray him to Pablo's anger Cradle said nothing in the commencement. But towards the end, he relaxed a little.

At the termination of a quarter of an hour of this conversation a reciprocal confidence continued to prolong, and every one found that Vandelles was acknowledged as one too many in the band.

"Then," said Domingo with much logic, "when there is some one too much that one must be suppressed."

"Yes," said Benito.

"Yes," echoed Cypriana.

"Yes, yes," repeated Cradle, "that is our decision. But the means of putting it into execution?"

"Bah!" said Benito, "this Frenchman is not so formidable after all."

"He is brave and resolute," returned Cradle: "but it is not him I fear."

"Who, then?"

"Steel-arm."

"We are three against him already."

"But he has Shanty on his side."

"A fool," said Benito; "as an Irishman always is."

"Ribonne."

"A boaster."

"And Luke."

"A child."

"Fool, boaster, and child; the three, in that case, count for but little. With Pablo and Vandelles, though, they will be stronger than us."

"A trick will serve better."

"Without doubt."

"If a quarrel could be raised between Pablo and Vandelles."

"The other day, we tried it and it did not succeed."

"A more serious motive must be found. Let us provoke one. For instance, Vandelles' jealousy against Pablo."

"Who will charge himself to do it?"

There was a moment's silence.

No one dared to encounter the terrible rage of the gambusino.

"Does jealousy exist in the placers?" asked Cypriana, who was deeply meditating. "The passion for gold extinguishes all others. See Benito, who was so jealous of his wife—now he leaves her with two young men."

"Luke is a child," responded Benito.

"Yes, but Steel-arm—"

"He loves Madam Vandelles."

"Pablo may be, like some men, capable of loving two persons at once."

"Well, so be it," said Benito.

Notwithstanding the affected assurance of the capataz, the words of Domingo and Cypriana had mounted to his head.

Anything, in fact, suffices to awaken the inquietudes of a jealous person.

If his self-love had not retained him, he would have immediately run to his wife.

At the end of five minutes he could not resist.

He for a pretext said his line was broken, and he returned to the camp.

But, instead of directly entering, he concealed himself in the wood as we have seen.

Scarcely had his back been turned, than Domingo and Cypriana burst into laughter.

"We are rid of him," said Domingo, "That is what you wished, is it not, Cypriana? Speak now what is your plan?"

"This: Rosina is angry with Pablo and jealous of Madam Vandelles."

"Oh!" cried Cradle, "are you sure?"

"Yes; this evening Rosina shall urge Vandelles against Pablo."

"That is a good idea."

"Yes," said Cradle, "let them be at loggerheads, and then, go it, man! hug, grizzly! But how?"

"Some day when Rosina is very angry against Bertha, she may reveal to Vandelles some secrets which will awake the Frenchman's fury and jealousy."

"Bah!" said Cradle, "and what then?"

"I do not know; but one day, when Donna Rosina was in anger against Madam Vandelles, she said, before me, speaking of Pablo and the Frenchwoman: 'Let them both be careful, and let Bertha never laugh at me! I like to go my way without harming any one; but, if they push me to the end, I shall tell her husband all which passed at San Fernando between her and Pablo. Five minutes after that, Vandelles will be leaving the band to fight with Pablo.'"

"You speak golden words, my girl," said Domingo.

"Unfortunately," said Cradle, "Madam Vandelles is so kind to every one

and especially to Donna Rosina, that the latter will never find an occasion to force her to speak out."

"I will find a way," observed Cypriana, with a malicious smile.

"Ah! you wish it to happen to Steel-arm or to Madam Vandelles?" asked Cradle.

"To Pablo—not much; but I hate the Frenchwoman with all my heart!"

"Why so?"

"I hate her! Since she has been with us, one would say we were all her servants; even this foolish Domingo went the other day to gather her some flowers."

"You are jealous, *preciosita mi alma* (precious one of my soul)," said Domingo, twirling his moustache with a killing air.

"Do you think she cares for you? Hardly had you turned your back, than she threw away the flowers."

"That is not true," said Domingo, who, notwithstanding the pretentious gallantry of his discourse, preserved at the bottom all the brutality of a half-savage vaquero.

Cypriana rose angrily.

"I say that if you—"

"Silence," said Domingo; "your jealousy annoys me. If you are not still in a minute—"

"Well?" interrupted she defiantly.

"Well! I shall calm you with this," responded Domingo, tapping the handle of his fishing-pole.

Cypriana furiously rushed at him.

He caught her, and, with a blow vigorously applied, he sent her rolling five or six paces from him.

She rose like a lioness and fell upon the vaquero with her navaja in her hand.

Domingo, laughing, grasped the young woman's hand and twisted it so violently that Cypriana, overcome by the pain, uttered a cry and let her weapon escape her.

Domingo picked up the navaja, put it in his pocket, and tranquilly lit a cigar.

He was habituated to scenes of this kind, and this was at least the twentieth time since their union with the miners that the two had thus disputed.

"Now that your little explanation is ended," said Cradle, who had regarded them with an impassible air, "let us speak a little reason. Cypriana's plan is good. It seems to me that—"

"*Hombre!*" interrupted Domingo, "see the hunters. What the deuce have they done with their horses?"

"Let us see," said Cradle, hastening to put his fishing implements in order.

A few minutes after, the fishers had joined the hunters upon the plateau, as the latter explained to Steel-arm why they returned on foot.

While Vandelles and Shanty were pursuing a wounded buck, the three horses left under the charge of Ribonne were stolen while he was sleeping.

"And did you see nothing, Ribonne?" inquired Steel-arm.

"Nothing at all, Don Pablo."

"Did you not follow the traces?"

"We did," responded Vandelles; "but on arriving at the foot of the mountain, we suddenly lost them. In vain we remained more than two hours in that place, it was impossible to discover a single clue."

"They climbed the mountain," said Cradle.

"In that place the sierra is perpendicular, and I defy, not a horse or a mule, but a goat itself to ascend the side where we were. A monkey could not do it."

"We will try to-morrow if we cannot find some trail. And now, keep good guard this night."

Despite his fatigue, Shanty, always complaisant, ran to aid Cypriana in the preparation of the repast.

Rosina was near the group of miners.

"What is your opinion upon our thieves?" inquired Vandelles of Pablo.

"They are probably Indians. If we were more to the north, that would appear to me very natural, for, in that case, they could not be other than the horse-thieves; Indians called so from their stealing horses to eat them."

"And," said Vandelles, "may they not attack us?"

"The hacenderos, whose pastures are robbed, naturally wage war against them; so these Indians eagerly seek to retaliate. Nevertheless, I would rather have an encounter with these horse-thieves than with the Apaches."

"Do the Apaches come as far as this?" asked Cradle.

"Sometimes. They belong to tribes who make long expeditions for hunting and pillaging. Heaven preserve us from encountering them, for their cruelty is dreadful."

Thanks to the success of Cradle and Benito in the fishing, the meal was sumptuous.

The salmon trouts of California are most delicious, and one which Cradle had caught weighed three pounds and a half.

All dined, or rather supped, for it was eight o'clock when the repast was put upon the table.

It was agreed that Shanty, Cradle and Ribonne were to remain in the camp the next day, more to guard the camp than to dig gold.

Pablo was to take with him Benito and Domingo, the two best rastreadores of the expedition.

Vandelles was to accompany them to show the spot where the hunters had lost the tracks of their horses.

The miners, after smoking a pipe or two by the fire, made their preparations for the night.

The two couples entered their cabins, and in a few minutes were asleep, the ones in their zarapes, the others in the skins of wild beasts.

The most profound obscurity still covered the valley when Steel-arm and his companions left the encampment.

At the moment when the first beams of the sun commenced to gild the crest of the mountains, Pablo and the three gold-finders arrived at the site where the horses had so suddenly disappeared.

Pablo chose a neighboring clearing for a rallying point.

Departing from this common centre, each miner explored a determined space, and was to acquaint his comrades by a signal if he found anything important.

This signal, which was a shrill whistle, was to be repeated by the nearest man, and this latter was to successively warn the others till the farthest one should be acquainted.

This known, every one was to return to the clearing, and unite with his comrades.

At the end of an hour and a half, Benito gave the signal, which Vandelles and Pablo repeated as they found themselves to the right and left.

Domingo, always sluggish, had remained far behind the others, and the thickness of the wood in some measure prevented his hearing the signal; so he did not arrive at the clearing till long after the others.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE INDIANS.

THE half-breed conducted his comrades almost to the place where he had lost the trail.

Between this place and the clearing where the horses passed in their disap-

pearance, they found a ditch preceded by a little knoll. The stony and dry soil of this hill rendered search useless.

"There is but one thing to be done," said Benito; "that is to take the back trail."

This trail, followed with a patience and sagacity which are the peculiar qualities of hunters and backwoodsmen, soon led the miners to the foot of the mountains.

There, the earth becoming dry and rocky, they lost all signs of the trail.

"Let us examine the rocks," said Pablo.

At the end of about a quarter of an hour, Benito called Steel-arm.

"See," said he, pointing to a narrow opening slightly masked by some stones and withered leaves.

"The horses could scarcely have passed there," observed Pablo. "They must have been slain and cut up before."

"Steel-arm," said Domingo an instant after, "here's a place where the horses have broken the rock with the point of their shoes."

"The sand is wet also," said Pablo. "The wind came from the other quarter, and could not have brought it here."

"The rock has been washed," said Vandelles, who was wiping away with some dry leaves the sand collected on the side of a block of quartz.

"And see the drops of blood," added Domingo.

Some other discoveries of this kind sufficed to prove to the hunters that their horses had perished at this place.

"There is but one thing to be done," said Vandelles, who retrieved his numerous faults by a bravery almost approaching temerity, "that is to enter this opening."

Benito and Domingo exchanged a glance.

If it had been any other person, Pablo would probably have let him enter upon this perilous enterprise, which, however dangerous, was necessary.

Nevertheless, thinking of his position as to Vandelles, Steel-arm had fear of the terrible responsibility he would run when with Bertha.

He did his best to restrain the Frenchman, but uselessly.

In vain he objected that he did not know the Indian artifices—that he had neither the agility nor the piercing sight of Benito or of Domingo—Vandelles persisted in his intention.

It is true that Benito had a way of offering himself in his place that decided Vandelles to refuse, as well as to dispose him to reject the counsels of Pablo.

"If Vandelles fears to leave his bones in this place," said the half-breed, mockingly, "I am ready to replace him."

"Go to the deuce!" cried Vandelles. "When there is any danger to be braved, I ask no person to replace me."

"I will pass the first, then," said Steel arm.

"I will not allow it," said Vandelles. "If anything happens to you what will become of our expedition?"

"Who will maintain order in our band?" added Benito. "Remember that we have three females among us and more than sixty thousand dollars of gold. Five minutes after your death, we will all be cutting each other's throats for the gold and the women."

Steel-arm too well understood his companions not to recognize the justice of the half-breed's observation, interested though he might be.

While he was hesitating upon these sentiments, Vandelles had entered the aperture; as it was narrow and low, he was obliged to crawl like a serpent to glide between the rocks.

As he disappeared, Pablo threw to him the end of a lasso, the other extremity of which he held in his hand.

"Listen," said he; "if you meet danger, shake this cord, of which Domingo will hold the end."

"Yes," replied Vandelles, of whom there could be seen already only his feet, and who with reason suspected the two Mexicans, "but I would rather have the cord in your hands. Don Pablo."

"So be it," said Steel-arm; "but I pray you to shake the cord at the slightest danger."

Five minutes passed.

The leather thong still remained half slackened.

Suddenly, Steel-arm felt it tighten and then relax.

He gently pulled it to him.

It followed the impulsion he gave it.

"Vandelles is returning," said the Californian.

He pulled quicker and stronger.

The lasso, at the end of which was a cord which had been attached to it to lengthen it, offered no resistance.

The leather of the lasso had been cut near Vandelles' hand, this being proved by the small quantity of the thong which remained.

At this very instant, there came from the distance the sounds of four gun shots coming from the side of the encampment.

One of them was much louder than the others.

"They are fighting upon the plateau," cried Benito; "that last shot came from Cradle's rifle, I will swear it, on my head!"

"Let's run to the camp," said Domingo.

"But Vandelles?" said Pablo, with anguish. "We cannot leave him here."

"At this moment they are, perhaps, killing my wife and child," cried Benito. "Come, Steel-arm, come!"

"Think for what fate savages reserve their prisoners," added Domingo.

The unfortunate Californian seemed to see Bertha struggling in the arms of an Indian.

An icy sweat ran from his forehead.

"We cannot leave Vandelles," muttered he again.

He approached the opening and shouted to Vandelles with all the power of his voice.

No reply.

He listened, but no sound came.

"They are firing again," cried Benito. "In heaven's name, Steel-arm, let them not kill the poor women!"

Pablo tore his breast with his fingers.

If it had been anybody else save Vandelles, Steel-arm would not have been reluctant to abandon him to run to the aid of the woman he adored.

But, precisely because Vandelles was the sole obstacle which rose between Bertha and the Californian, the latter hesitated to leave his rival.

In spite of the representations and supplications of the two Mexicans, Steel-arm entered the opening.

He had gone five or six paces amid the most calm and profound obscurity, when he felt himself seized from behind by his feet.

"It is I, Don Pablo," said Domingo, for it was he. "We can see smoke and red lights from the camp—the cabins are on fire. In heaven's name, come! or Benito and I will leave you."

Pablo called again many times for Vandelles in a voice which anxiety doubled in volume.

Complete silence was all his reply.

He turned and receded.

"Domingo," said he to the vaquero "you must remain here."

"Caramba! Don Pablo, certainly not. I will—"

"Obey! If you are not here at my return, by my word—one never broken—I will blow out your brains. Watch

this entrance, and, if you see Vandelles, give him aid if he require it."

For a long time, the miners had seen the impossibility of resisting the gambusino's will.

Though muttering angrily, Domingo obeyed and hastened to climb a tree, in the foliage of which he concealed himself.

As for Steel-arm and Benito, they left the vaquero, running with such swiftness that a horse scarcely could have followed them.

Notwithstanding the agility of the capataz, the latter was soon distanced by Steel-arm, who disappeared from the eyes of his already breathless companion.

Let us leave them thus proceeding to the succor of their friends, and see what has become of Vandelles.

After having crawled upon his hands over the space of fifty or sixty feet, the Frenchman was sensible of a cool feeling caused by a blast of fresh air.

Foreseeing with reason that he would come upon some large opening, Vandelles had continued to advance.

Suddenly, he was grasped by the throat.

Before he could utter a cry, his head was enveloped within a wolf-skin which was attached in such a manner around his neck that it was impossible for him to make a single sound.

Then, two men took him, one by the feet—the other by the head, and threw him into a corner against the rock.

At the end of a quarter of an hour—to him appearing a century—he felt that the cords, which fixed the wolf-skin about his throat, were relaxing.

It was time, for the unfortunate man was almost strangled; the blood had rushed to his head, and, to revive, water was thrown on his face.

Then he could see a little about him, he was conscious that he was in a grotto, rather spacious, glittering with stalactites.

Near him were three Indians, armed with *macanas*, or tomahawks, which they brandished menacingly at him.

He would have made a step, and then perceived that he was tied by the legs.

He bent to unloosen his bonds, but, instantly, one of the savages raised his *macana* in a manner which caused him to resign all idea of releasing himself.

They then gagged him and flung him into a corner.

At eight or ten paces from him, the Indians conversed with vivacity.

One of them, whom Vandelles had not seen before, appeared as if recounting something.

From the animated pantomime which accompanied the Indians' recital, Vandelles thought that he understood that this man announced important news.

Soon, this man left the cavern with four other Indians.

Two savages alone remained with the Frenchman, whom they were careful to watch and examine his bonds.

Patience never was the dominating quality of Vandelles, who was stifling with rage.

His cords, besides, caused him great pain, and it was with the greatest efforts that he could change his position.

At the end of an hour he had disembarassed himself a little of the gag. Then, by moving his arms and legs, he relaxed the cords which pinioned him and could make a few movements.

His eyes commenced to be habituated to the obscurity.

He soon distinguished something which glistened upon the ground at the bottom of the cave.

It took him nearly half an hour to reach this object.

His two hands, still tied, touch it—it was a knife.

Vandelles made a joyful movement.

He manœuvred with his hands in such a manner as to cut asunder the leather thong uniting them.

Scarcely had he commenced, than two Indians came running into the grotto.

They seemed almost breathless with a long run and uttered exclamations of rage and desperation.

The other Indians questioned them eagerly.

The new-comers replied by a recital frequently interrupted by the yells and lamentations of a dozen squaws, seated in the background of the grotto.

When the Indians had completed their narration, there was an explosion of yells, shouts and cries.

Then two of the savages raised their voices as if to propose to the others a motion which seemed to be received with enthusiasm.

Though not one word of the language of these Indians was understood by Vandelles, yet he divined that they spoke of a vengeance to be wreaked upon their prisoner.

So, pressing his wrists upon the edge of the knife at the risk of cutting his hands, his thongs were divided and fell apart.

At this moment, the squaws rushed upon him.

One of them, an old woman with hideous visage, clutched him by the hair to drag him into the middle of the grotto.

She uttered a cry of triumph, immediately changed into a groan of pain for a blow of Vandelles' fist laid her prostrate.

The Indians rushed to her succor.

At the same instant, the Frenchman severed the long thong which encumbered his legs, and darted towards the opening of the cavern, closely followed by the Indians, who brandished their swords and tomahawks.

Fortunately for the fugitive, the Indian, who led the pursuers, stumbled over the body of the woman, and fell, rolling under his companions' feet.

As Vandelles half bent to leave the grotto, the plumes and hair of an Indian rose before him.

By a movement almost instinctive, Vandelles raised his arm, and struck with his knife at the savage who barred his passage.

The latter fell backwards, yelling with pain.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LUKE KERMAIN.

If any observing person wished to calculate what human nature can support in the way of fatigue and labor, but a few days passed in the placers of California would amply suffice.

Stimulated by the thirst for gold, each miner works with frenzy and never abandons his toil until completely overcome by weariness.

So, at sunrise, Cradle, Shanty, Luke and Ribonne were a foot.

Earlier than Cypriana, Bertha served up to them a breakfast of cold meats, biscuit and tea.

"What a good creature!" exclaimed Cradle, following with his eyes the young woman, who walked to the tent, smiling upon the miners.

"While these blasted greasers are sound asleep, she is here to serve us—she, who might fold her arms, if she liked and keep them so for the whole of the time."

"Donna Rosina, is very kind and good also," said Luke, blushing to the roots of his hair.

"Ah, ha! did I say she wasn't, my young game-cock?" returned Cradle, laughing, "but, in the mines, do you see, a good cook is worth more than the finest lady in New York. All these

Spaniards, Mexicans, Californians, and such trash are good for, is to dance and make love."

Revolted at Rosina being misunderstood, Luke replied with that awkward impetuosity of a timid man pushed to extremity.

In the midst of his harangue and as his animation became more and more bold, Ribonne interrupted him with some joke which made every one laugh.

Fiery and susceptible, Kermain immediately stopped.

He rose, took a morsel of biscuit and some cold meat, and left the cabin without listening to Shanty and Ribonne why endeavored to retain him.

"Why do you torment the poor lad?" said the Irishman.

"Why is he mad at a joke?" retorted Ribonne.

"He does not like to be joked at. There is nothing to boast of in plaguing an honest lad who asks but to be left alone. Oh! you have no need to roll your eyes. I am not afraid of your anger."

"Shanty!"

"That's my name, and what have you got to say against such a dacent one?"

Then, the Irishman losing patience, he ended his phrase by a blow of his fist at Ribonne.

The latter, who knew the habitual termination of the Irishman's pacific speeches, was luckily on his guard.

He leaped backwards, and returned Shanty's cuff by throwing a knife at his head.

Then came an encounter in the course of which both rolled on the ground.

As for Cradle, leaning his arms upon the table, he overlooked the combatants with the utmost impassibility, and conscientiously applauded each well parried or well given blow.

During this time, Luke had installed him upon a hillock not far from Rosina's cabin.

The latter had perceived the young German and came to seat herself by his side.

Luke was, of all the band, the only one with whom Rosina conversed the most easily.

In him, she did not meet with the scepticism of Vandelles, the rude jokes of Ribonne, the indifference of Cradle, the jealousy of Benito, or the vanity of Domingo.

A voice which speaks of love always sounds agreeably to the ear of a woman, though it may not find an echo in her heart.

Though Luke had never said one word of love to Rosina, his eyes and his timidity too well betrayed his secret.

"Well, Luke, what have you done to-day?" asked the Spaniard, smiling. "You are as gloomy as Domingo when he has work to do."

"But no," stammered Kermain, who blushed at the least word which Rosina addressed him.

"Have you had a quarrel with your comrades?"

"No, Dona Rosina."

"Is it because my presence displeases you that you always answer 'no' and 'no'?" said the Spaniard.

"Oh, no."

"There again."

"Oh, senora—"

"I will go, then," said she, pretending to rise.

He looked at her with an air so sad and so suppliant that she had not the courage to torment him further. "I swear to you, Donna Rosina—"

"Do not swear," interrupted she.

"But—"

"It is useless, I was jesting. Have you had a quarrel with your companions?"

"Well?" said Rosina, stamping impa-

tiently, "well?" continued she as he did not reply.

"Well, senora!" said Cypriana, who had silently approached, "those English brutes (she spoke of Cradle and Shanty) said that we were good for nothing and Luke defended us or rather you."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard him."

"Is that true, Luke?" inquired Rosina.

"Yes," replied the young German.

"Very well. Give me your hand—but what have you done—you tremble?"

Cypriana burst into laughter, and left them.

Completely forgetting himself, Luke stammered some reply, which Rosina could not understand; but he regarded her with an air so soft and tender that she felt her own hand tremble as she dropped it into that of Kermain.

"Why are you teased thus on my account?" began the Spaniard.

"I do not know, senora; they said—"

"What?"

"I dare not repeat it to you."

"Child!" said Rosina, who often took a protecting air towards the young man, without thinking that their ages were very nearly alike. "Go on."

"They said—"

"They said? Go on, Luke," said the little despot clapping her hands impatiently.

"Well, they said that I loved you," said Luke in a breath.

After this terrible avowal, he lowered his head without venturing to look upon the Spaniard.

Rosina laughed.

"What a little fool," cried she. "And what did you say?"

"I? nothing."

"Coward! why did you not reply?"

"I could not."

"Go on, will you?—you spoke well enough to that brute of an American and that Irish booby."

"Perhaps so, Donna Rosina; but when they pronounce your name, I lose my senses and can find nothing to answer."

"Truly—and why so?"

"I don't know. When I hear any one speaking of you, my heart beats so strong, that I can scarcely breathe. It is so now—"

"Poor lad!" murmured the Spaniard, becoming suddenly serious.

"Well! senora, merely thinking of you produces the same effect. When I am with others I dare not speak of you, for it seems to me that every one would look at me."

"Why?"

"I do not know—and yet I love the name, for I often repeat it to myself when alone. When I am by your side, Donna Rosina, I am happy. Stay, you will not mock at me? sometimes my heart is so full that tears stand in my eyes."

And he raised to Rosina his eyes full of tears.

"Poor child," repeated Donna Rosina, deeply touched by this simple love.

"You are not angry, are you, Donna Rosina?" asked he.

"No, my poor Luke. Only do not think so often of me."

"I think of you always."

"You are wrong, Luke; you well know that it is wrong to love me otherwise than as a friend."

"Why so?"

"I am Benito's wife."

Luke's countenance immediately underwent a change of expression.

"True," murmured he. "I wish to die with you and defending you."

"It will be better to live, Luke, to be happy."

"No, senora, I too well feel that I can never be happy. If I die away from you—"

you will sometimes think of me, Donna Rosina?"

"Yes, my poor Luke, and with a sincere affection, I swear to you; but drive away such foolish ideas. I know——"

She was interrupted by frightful yells.

A dozen Indians had reached the plateau about twenty paces from her.

Before she had time to make a movement of flight, many arrows flew swiftly between her and Luke.

One of the darts entered Rosina's arm, and she made an instinctive start backwards to avoid it.

Luke grasped the young woman in his arms and bore her away to the cabin.

"Rosina, my well beloved Rosina!" murmured he, depositing upon a mat the Spaniard, whom he thought wounded to the death, "Rosina!"

"Leave me, Luke," said the young woman; "I am not wounded."

And she extended her hand.

"Heaven be thanked," cried he.

He carried the hand to his lips, seized one of the guns which was hanging from a deer's horn, and rushed from the cabin.

"Luke!" cried Rosina, "where are you going?"

He instantly returned.

"Come to the other cabin," said he. "It is more secure, and in it we can defend ourselves better."

Then, without giving her time to answer, he seized her in his arms, and ran with a strength and agility which would be totally unexpected from him.

He had scarcely gone more than ten paces, when the savages let fly a second shower of arrows.

One alone struck him, but the iron head glanced from his side and made only a long scratch without penetrating deeply.

Kermain deposited Rosina near Bertha, who received her in her arms.

Then the young woman joined the other miners.

Luke was no longer the same being.

The fire of love and heat of combat had made the child a man.

After discharging his gun, and with eyes flaming, he darted from the cabin without lending an ear to the words of the miners. Then, with a hatchet in his hand, he rushed like a madman upon the Indians. In a moment he had beaten down two; but a second afterwards, he himself was rolling upon the ground, from the blow of a tomahawk.

"The cursed little fool!" said Shanty tearing his hair in despair. "We must rescue him, friends, or his hair will be raised."

He stopped, and sent a bullet through the head of an Indian, who had bent over Luke to scalp him.

"Forward!" cried Shanty who rushed, with Cradle and Ribonne, upon the redskins.

Though the latter were much more numerous, the contents of the revolvers forced them to retreat a few paces.

Shanty with his left hand grasped Luke by the body, at the same time as with his right he split the skull of a red man who, though wounded, still clung to the young man's legs.

Then he returned, running to the cabin.

Cradle and Ribonne with their revolvers covered the retreat.

Fortunately, the Indians had not recovered sufficiently from their dread of the revolvers to be very correct in their aim.

At first, all believed Luke was dead.

But, at the end of two or three minutes, he opened his eyes, and instinctively seized Rosina's hand, as she was supporting the discolored brow of the young German.

"He lives!" cried the Spaniard. "My poor Luke——"

At the sound of her voice, Kermain rose upon his elbow.

He looked around him with an air still vacant.

The reports of the fire-arms and the whoops of the savages brought back his recollection.

He hurriedly rose, and seized the first weapon which his hand could reach.

As he staggered, the women made efforts to retain him.

He shook himself from them, and tried again to leave the cabin.

"May the devil twist my neck if I leave you go!" cried Cradle, seizing him by the body. "Are you crazy? do you want all the women murdered? Paddy!" shouted he, pointing to an Indian who advanced to the cabin, macana in hand.

Shanty silently aimed his rifle, which he had passed through one of the loopholes which the miners had made with a couple of blows from an axe in the walls of the cabin.

A second more, and a detonation resounded.

The Indian fell forward a few steps, and dropped upon the ground with a horrid yell.

"There is already seven down," said Ribonne. "How many are there left, Paddy?"

"Fifteen or twenty, I think."

"King of the air! the more we kill, the more they have, the cursed redskins."

"The others were hid," said the Irishman.

"Be watchful," said Cradle; "some of them may have the idea of attacking us behind. Watch that side; I will make a hole on the wall by the mountain."

"We shall see them if they pass," observed Shanty.

"Perhaps. But these red devils can crawl like snakes."

While he was speaking, Cradle looked for a hatchet in a corner of the cabin.

Ribonne aided him, as Kermain and Shanty kept watch over the other sides.

Then, when they had found the hatchet to cut the trunks of trees and the crow-bars to break the stones, Ribonne stationed himself in the quarter overlooking the stream.

"Stay," cried Shanty; "what are the savages doing yonder?"

"What do you see?"

"They are stealing away one after another; you can't see now more than five."

"Have they any idea of ridding us of their presence?" said Ribonne.

"Do not think so," replied Cradle, shaking his head. "Well, Pat," added he, addressing the Irishman who faced the valley.

"They are returning," responded Paddy. "They carry wood—they throw it on the ground—there come others."

"With wood?"

"Yes; every one has a load."

"What the deuce is that for?" inquired Ribonne.

"The red devils are going to set fire to the cabins!" cried Cradle. "Take this bar, Shanty, and leave me your post."

"Well?" asked the Irishman at the end of a few minutes.

"They are still bringing wood—ah! they are firing the piles," added the American.

"That will do no harm from that distance," observed Ribonne.

"I do not understand their plan. Oh, if Pablo were here!" sighed Paddy Shanty.

"Blast my eyes!" cried Cradle, "I see their design now. Do you see that smoke?"

"They mean to suffocate us!" exclaimed Ribonne.

"They wish to approach the cabin

under cover of the smoke," said Cradle. "Curses on the redskins! We can hardly see them now; how shall we take aim?"

"Holy Virgin!" cried Cypriana weeping, "and thou, my patron saint, have mercy on me!"

"Silence, women," exclaimed Cradle; "how can we act with your noise? Well, my friends, what is to be done?"

"Let us profit by the smoke and risk a sortie."

"No," returned Cradle, "we would be killed in an instant."

"Listen," said Bertha advancing; "if Shanty will make a large hole on the side of the mountain, we can——"

"Go out by it, you mean?" interrupted Ribonne. "You are right, madam; what do you say, Cradle?"

"It is indeed our only course," said the American after a pause. "Let us work with Shanty."

In less than two minutes, a passage was formed large enough for a person to go through.

The women passed the first.

"Stop," said Cradle; "these Indians will enter the cabin."

"What will become of us?" moaned Cypriana.

"Silence!" cried the American. "The sound of your voice may bring a shower of arrows upon us. Speak low, and have no useless conversation."

As he finished these words, he raised his rifle and fired at an Indian whose head and arm he had seen through the smoke near the cabin.

"There, Shanty, take the nearest," he exclaimed instantly; "sec, there are two or three—well done, my lad!"

"Do you wish me to load your guns?" inquired Bertha, seeing that, with the exception of Luke, each miner had two guns.

"Can you do it?" asked Cradle.

"It will not be the first time," replied Bertha, taking the American's discharged rifle.

Six shots rapidly succeeded each other and four Indians fell.

Nevertheless, the savages continued to advance sheltered by their rampart of smoke.

With long poles, they pushed before them the flaming branches, which already touched the cabin.

The miners having receded to the solid rock of the mountain, could go no farther.

The rock rose almost perpendicular behind them, cutting off all hopes of flight in that direction.

A few minutes more and they were enveloped in the cloud of smoke which concealed their enemies.

Suddenly, they heard three reports of fire-arms from the side of the valley.

The yells of the Indians showed that they also heard them.

"That is Pablo!" cried Shanty, "we are saved!"

Hardly had the words been spoken than a man bounded through the smoke and flame, running to the miners, who welcomed him with a hearty cheer.

"Is there any one wounded?" said the Californian, turning his eyes upon the women.

"Scratches," laconically answered Cradle.

"Bend down," continued Pablo to the females, "for then there is less chance of hurt from the arrows. Now, friends, forward. Leave not one of the redskins alive, for if you do, we may expect another band upon us."

And thus speaking, he rushed again through the barrier of smoke and flame, closely followed by Cradle and Ribonne.

Attacked at the same time by Benito who fired upon them from behind a rock, the Indians fled.

The miners pursued them.

Luke, who seemed as if possessed, as Shanty said, was ever in advance of the others.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE VICTORY

Of a dozen Indians who remained at the moment of Pablo's arrival, seven had already succumbed under the machetes or the bowie-knives of the miners.

An eighth rolled upon the ground with Luke, to whose succor Pablo had rushed just in time to ward off a blow which of it had taken effect upon the young German would have cloven his head.

Cradle was watching another savage, who had thrown himself flat on the earth behind a little elevation and from which he could not go without exposure to the American's fire.

Ribonne had run fruitlessly after an Indian who had entered the valley and who had been shot at twice by his pursuer.

Pablo hastily pinioned Luke's Indian, and gave him to Ribonne.

Then he rushed after the fugitive.

The latter ran like a deer, but the Californian was more than his match and visibly gained upon him.

The two were soon lost to view.

"Luke," said Cradle, "now that your man is secure, help me to catch this fellow hidden behind that little hillock. Take Domingo's lasso and go straight to him—there—more to the right—go on—do you see him, ha?"

Luke did not answer, but rushed forward.

At the same instant, an Indian, who had been crouched behind a rock, leaped out like a hare suddenly surprised.

Before he made three steps, a bullet struck him in the leg and he fell.

An instant after, Luke and Cradle had bound him like his comrade.

A few minutes later, they perceived Steel-arm coming towards the plateau.

Before him marched the fugitive, whose hands were tied behind his back.

On reaching his comrades, he counted nine Indian corpses extended on the ground.

"I found four others in the valleys," said Pablo; "let some one go to see if they are dead."

Cradle and Ribonne obeyed, but they discovered only three bodies.

The fourth Indian, who was wounded and had pretended death to escape Steel-arm, had glided behind a tuft of cactus.

Unfortunately for him, Cradle observed him and sent a bullet which hit him in the breast.

Thirteen dead and three wounded was the total of the Indian loss.

Adding to this the two other savages who had escaped, it was a band of some twenty men which had come to attack the gold-finders' camp.

"They were the horse-thieves," said Steel-arm, scornfully. "Those Indians are only good for stealing. Apaches would fight with more courage and skill."

"Now, Steel-arm," said Cradle, pointing to the prisoners, one of whom was seriously wounded, "what shall we do with these three rogues? My idea is, that they will form a nice figure at the end of three fine cords dangling from a tree."

"That is not my idea," said Benito. "I ask for them to be hung by the feet, so that their torture may endure a little longer."

"They must not be killed," said Steel-arm. "We shall need them to recover Vandelles, if he is still living. So, cut their bonds, but watch them carefully."

They went towards the plateau with the three prisoners.

Bertha, Rosina, and Cypriana came to them, followed by Shanty, who could not console himself at the combat having taken place without him.

"What has become of—"

But Bertha could not finish; she approached Pablo.

The latter lowered his eyes.

Though it was not his fault that Vandelles had met with misfortune, he reproached himself for abandoning him.

"Is he wounded—dead?" continued the young woman anxiously, Steel-arm's silence making her more uneasy.

"I hope not," finally returned the Californian.

"You hope? Speak! you left him to die?"

Pablo recounted all that had occurred till the moment when the gun-shots which they had heard in the direction of the camp had forced them to return in all haste.

"And you left him?" murmured she, in a tone of gentle reproach.

"To run to your defence," replied the Californian.

"You are going to his rescue?"

"Without doubt. Only our men are wearied; we are without cartridges. He must wait a few minutes."

"And during that time the Indians will avenge by my husband the death of their companions! Oh, no, Pablo! I shall go alone—"

"Alone?" repeated Pablo reproachfully.

"It will be for my husband."

"I go then," said Pablo. "My friends," cried he in a loud voice, "we will go now to save Vandelles."

"A moment, Steel-arm," exclaimed Cradle; "we are not made of iron. Give us at least five minutes' respite."

The others made the same demand. They were truly exhausted.

"You see?" said Pablo, turning to Madam Vandelles, whose eyes filled with tears at this mute reproach of her injustice.

"You are cruel, Pablo," murmured she, wringing her hands.

"Let every one take some food and a ration of rum," said Pablo to the miners. "I will prepare the cartridges."

To make amends for her unjust words, Bertha, who perceived that Pablo had been wounded on his left arm, folded her handkerchief as a bandage for the wound, which was, as he said, but a scratch.

He silently allowed it to be done, and sadly thanked her.

"You take nothing, Don Pablo," said the young woman touched by his mournfulness which she reproached herself as causing.

"I do not need it."

"Your wound is painful?"

"No," replied he, turning away his head.

"You are angry at me, Pablo?" said she in a trembling voice.

"No; but—I wish that your husband was here in my place, and I in his."

"Why?"

"Because, you would not be so anxious."

Bertha could not resist the sentiments which swelled her heart.

"Pablo," she said in a low voice, and seized his hand, shaking it energetically in her own, "Pablo, I love you."

He started and became so pale that she uttered a cry.

"Pablo," said she, "Pablo!"

"You love me," said he in his lowest tones, "you love me! can this be true?"

"Yes, Pablo; but calm yourself—"

"You love me?" repeated Pablo, who could not believe himself.

"You see now that he must be saved!" said the young woman.

"Yes," cried he, "I swear to save him

or die with him; but once more, say you love me."

"No, my friend," replied she firmly. "That is the last time you shall hear that avowal, which escaped me at the sight of your sufferings. My frankness at a moment like this, proves my absolute confidence in the nobleness of your character. In your turn, be generous. Let me not regret having uttered those words. Speak no more of your love, that I may continue to think of you as a friend."

"I obey, Bertha," replied Steel-arm with deep and respectful tenderness.

"Thanks. Now recollect that my husband is a prisoner, and that it is your duty to save him."

"You are right," said the gambusino.

They exchanged a last look, and a last shake of the hand; then Steel-arm ran to call the miners who were collecting provisions.

"Another moment, Steel-arm," said Cradle, who held in one hand a piece of meat, and in the other a large glass of brandy.

"Not a second," cried Pablo, "I go immediately. Am I to go alone? Hurry!"

"Who is to guard the camp?" demanded Cradle.

"Luke and Ribonne, as they are wounded."

"I can walk," said Ribonne.

"No matter!" replied Steel-arm. "You must remain here. Keep good guard and fire two shots if you are attacked. Come, come, my friends; lose no time."

Electrified by the energy of their chief, the gold-seekers forgot their fatigue.

Bertha marched between Pablo and Shanty, who aided her in difficult places.

Rosina and Cypriana remained in the encampment.

The former felt the demon of jealousy gnawing her heart.

She had seen Pablo kiss Bertha's hand, and, though not one word of their discourse had reached her ears, she too well divined it. She retired within her cabin and threw herself upon the bed, weeping and stamping with rage.

Cypriana, finding her in this state, made all possible efforts to still more excite her against Bertha, in which she too well succeeded.

"I will be revenged," said the Spaniard, mad with anger and jealousy. "Yes, I will have revenge, I swear it by the saints! It is the death of her husband which makes Bertha so imprudent, but I will not let her brave me thus. Before she marries Pablo, I will stab her with my own hands!"

While she was thus a prey to jealous emotions, the gold-hunters had in all haste proceeded to the cavern.

When within twenty paces of it, they perceived Domingo who came to them.

He said he had seen nothing and questioned in his turn with anxiety easily understood.

"The Indians who escaped us have not entered the cave," said Pablo. "You have not seen them, Domingo?"

"No, Steel-arm," replied the vaquero.

"We must question the prisoners," said Cradle, pointing to the three Indians. "Perhaps there is a second entrance."

"They will not tell," returned Pablo.

"We can put powder between their fingers," said Cradle.

"How cruel!" exclaimed Bertha.

"As you please," said Cradle.

"That would only be fighting them in their own way," added Benito.

They then attempted by threats and promises, to wring the secret of the second entrance from the Indians, but they persisted in seeming not to understand what was wanted.

"We have but one course to pursue," said Pablo, "we must enter the cavern. We can put the prisoners before us to serve as bucklers."

"The others may cut their bonds and they may turn against us."

"We shall not give them time," replied Pablo; "besides there is no other way."

He took one of the Indians, making him a sign to enter the grotto.

The savage resisted.

Then Pablo pushed him before him and forced him to go in the opening. He followed him, holding with one hand a revolver and the other firmly grasping the captive's legs.

He had besides a knife between his teeth.

Shanty and Cradle came immediately after him.

Suddenly the Indian uttered a cry and fell back with such force that Pablo was obliged to recede.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DIVISION OF THE GOLD.

THIS was that Indian Vandelles had met in the passage and at whom he had struck with his knife.

Vandelles followed him in his retreat.

Arrived at about half way through the passage leading from the cave to the exterior, the Frenchman suddenly heard the voices of the miners; he recognized especially that of Pablo.

"Who goes there?" challenged he.

"Friend!" replied Pablo.

"Quick, give me a revolver and leave the passage clear."

Pablo hastened to do as he asked.

Vandelles took the weapon in his left hand.

It was indeed time that succor reached him.

One of his pursuers was wrestling with him and endeavoring to prevent him using his knife.

The Frenchman placed the muzzle of the revolver to the savage's brow and fired.

A cry was heard.

The Indian made a convulsive movement and fell nearly in the same spot as where he had stood.

The ball had entered his skull.

The others retreated and disappeared in the cave.

Instead of joining his friends, Vandelles darted in their pursuit.

Not seeing him come out, the miners resolutely advanced. Guided by the sound of the voice of Vandelles, Pablo's companions proceeded to the grotto.

Unfortunately, the obscurity forced them to advance with circumspection.

When they arrived at the second grotto the Indians had disappeared again.

"Where have the redskins gone?" shouted Benito to Vandelles, who returned slowly sheathing his knife.

"It is useless to follow them," replied he; "the cavern opens on that side into the prairie. The Indians are on their horses and far away by this time."

"We will chase them," cried Cradle.

"They have taken all their horses, and we cannot hope to catch them with no other help than our legs. Besides, that part of the mountain is straight like a wall and smooth as a looking-glass."

"They descended, though."

"Yes, but they had a ladder; and they have cut it to pieces and left us the remains. Come and see."

He conducted them to the end of the grotto, and pointed to a heap of green branches which, twisted together, had been used as a ladder, and now lay fifty feet at least below the opening of the cavern.

The Indians were already out of gunshot.

While conversing with Vandelles, Steel-arm visited the interior of the vast cave which extended its labyrinths in every direction under the mountain.

"Shall we not soon return to the camp?" asked Benito, who was burning with desire to see his wife and child.

"Yes," said Pablo; "but, before going we must conceal the opening of this cavern."

"For what good?"

"Who knows? It may be useful some day."

"Do you fear some new danger," asked Ribonne.

"In this region there should always be suspicion, and precautions should never be neglected."

Benito, Cradle and Steel-arm arranged rocks, branches and the earth in a manner to hide the aperture.

This labor, of two hours' duration, was performed so thoroughly that a person passing by ten paces from the place would not suspect its existence.

When this was finished, they set off for the camp.

More impatient than the others, Benito was in advance.

Rosina, Cypriana and Domingo ran to meet them.

While Ribonne, the usual orator of the band, recounted the details of the expedition, Bertha entered her cabin with Vandelles.

She felt culpable towards him, and, for some alleviation, redoubled her care and affection.

She had scarcely spoken to Steel-arm, save to thank him at the moment when her husband was in safety.

Steel-arm was still under the influence of the young woman's avowal.

A half hour later, all the miners were united for dinner in the large cabin.

After their hearty appetite had been appeased, each man took to his pipe.

Excepting Bertha and Luke, everybody smoked; Rosina and Cypriana themselves made cigarettes.

The conversation turned upon the incidents of the day.

Cradle proposed the pursuit of the Indian fugitives, but his proposition met with no echo.

"They will bring some others, you may count upon it," said the American, "and we will have perhaps another fight with the red devils."

"I fear the return of the Apaches more," said Pablo, "the ones whose trail we struck in coming. So my advice is for a return."

An unanimous cry rose against him.

"Leave such a placer!" was the outcry from all sides, "abandon the fortune just as we are being repaid for our toil!"

"Let us profit by the moment when we are united to reckon our shares together," said Vandelles.

Pablo made a contrary gesture. He foresaw the effect of these valuations, which placed, so to say, under the eyes of each man the immense portion reserved for Vandelles.

But the Frenchman's words were supported by his comrades, and Pablo could not oppose.

Cradle, who with Bertha, kept account, announced the quantity of gold already collected which was written every night in two little registers. This enumeration might be dispensed with; for every miner knew, to nearly a dollar, the exact total, which was two hundred and forty-eight pounds of gold, representing a value of sixty-four thousand five hundred dollars.

The half reserved for Vandelles, according to the conditions agreed to from the first starting, comprised about thirty-two thousand two hundred and fifty dollars.

The same sum was to be divided be-

tween Cradle, Ribonne, Shanty, Benito, Domingo, and Luke.

Besides, one portion was set apart for the son of Jose Guerino and the heirs of Mundiaz, if they could be found.

The thirty-two thousand two hundred and fifty dollars remaining was to be divided in seven parts, leaving to each miner the sum of four thousand six hundred dollars or thereabouts.

In all other circumstances, this portion would have appeared a fine result; but the immense share of Vandelles made that of his comrades seem insignificant.

Vandelles, himself, not satisfied with this brilliant sum and urged by cupidity, insisted more than the others for a longer stay upon the plateau Del Desierto.

Perhaps Steel-arm would have insisted in his intention, had not Bertha herself raised her voice to pray him not to depart.

Her hidden motive was that at the mines she could see Pablo every day but once in San Francisco, they would be separated, probably forever.

If this thought had not come at the time it did, perhaps she would not have obeyed, but, when Vandelles by his words had made the same idea as that which was in Bertha's mind, she pressed eagerly to speak when she could keep up the illusion, and pretend that she obeyed her husband's desire.

Since he knew he was loved, Pablo could read like an open book the thoughts of Bertha.

Divining the young woman's intention, he gave her a look which made her heart bound with confusion and delight.

Unfortunately the Californian's glance had not escaped either Rosina or Cypriana.

"Do you see how he obeys all her wishes?" asked the latter of Rosina.

The Spaniard did not answer, but she bit her lips till the blood ran.

"Well!" said Steel-arm, "since everybody is of that mind, we will remain some time here."

After these words, he took Cradle one side and gave him some recommendations.

A quarrel had already been raised between Vandelles and Benito from a remark of Ribonne that a magnificent present was to be given by Vandelles to each of his associates.

"I know what I have to do," retorted the latter amidst laughter from all around him, "and I have no need of counsel from any one."

"That astonishes me," said Benito. "I never thought Vandelles was generous."

"If I am not generous of my gold, I am of my blood at least," replied Vandelles. "I know some fine speakers who dared not raise their voices in the cavern this afternoon."

"Every one in his turn," responded Benito.

"Yours does not arrive too often for your courage," said Vandelles.

"Demonio!" cried the capataz, "repeat what you said."

"Of course," replied Vandelles, who repeated the phrase word for word in the most insulting tone.

Benito rushed at him with his machete.

Vandelles, who had no weapons with him at that moment, seized the capataz by the body and disarmed him.

Unfortunately for the Frenchman, Domingo, who was nearest to the combatants, extended his leg in a way so as to trip up the two adversaries.

At the same time, and as if to help them, he gave a push which made Vandelles fall under Benito.

Then he, unperceived, placed a knife in the hands of the capataz whose machete was thrown from his reach.

The commencement of this quarrel

had escaped Steel-arm who was conversing with Cradle and Shanty.

At the cries which Bertha and Rosina uttered, Pablo had with a bound reached the two foes.

He pulled them asunder and hurled Benito with such violence away that the vaquero's head was nearly broken against the wall.

Shanty raised Vandelles.

Rosina ran to Benito, but he got up himself, pouring forth all the maledictions he could recollect from the rich collection which the Mexican language affords.

"Silence!" cried Pablo.

While the friends of Vandelles held him with great difficulty, Bertha, who had some influence over the capataz, approached him to calm him.

Unfortunately, in the state of jealousy and exasperation which Rosina had been in since morning, her presence was peculiarly unlucky.

"Go," said Rosina, repulsing her, "go to your lover."

"Rosina!" said Bertha.

"Leave me! Do you think I am the dupe of your hypocrisy?"

"Well answered," whispered Cypriana in the Spaniard's ear.

"I conjure you, Rosina," continued Bertha, "calm yourself; listen."

"No," cried the Spaniard, whom the priana still incited, "no! I have had enough of your deceit. Do you think I am ignorant of all which has passed between you and Don Pablo? If you push me on, I shall tell all I know."

"I not see you let Pablo kiss your hands?"

"What have you seen?" inquired Vandelles, who had heard but not understood the last words, as he approached with flashing eyes.

"Rosina!" murmured Bertha, supplicatingly.

"Courage!" whispered Cypriana, seeing her mistress hesitate; "show her now that you are not afraid of her."

Excited by her and by Benito, Rosina repeated what she had said.

"Is that true?" demanded Vandelles, who became pale with fury and jealousy.

"That is true," replied Pablo, intervening with his calm and firm voice; "Madam Vandelles wept that you were a prisoner. I swore to save you or to die with you. Madam Vandelles extended her hand and I kissed it—that is all."

"Yes," added Bertha, lowering her eyes.

Rosina laughed bitterly.

"All are blind to what they wish to be," said she.

"What do these words mean?" asked Vandelles.

"Rosina," said Pablo, interrupting the young woman who was about to reply, "you are playing a despicable part. Is it noble or generous?"

"Let her speak if she pleases," replied the Spaniard angrily. "I wish—"

"And I order you to be silent," cried Pablo, forgetting himself in the danger which Bertha ran.

"Speak, Rosina," said Vandelles. "I wish it."

"Go on to the end," muttered Cypriana, who felt little at her ease.

"Rosina!" said Steel-arm menacingly.

"Well?" retorted the young woman, "dare you strike me? Stay, here is my navaja—strike then!"

Pablo threw the knife upon the ground. If it was a man he would have died on the spot—but a woman, what could he do?

There was silence. Every breast was oppressed. Every one felt that the life of a man had fallen from the Spaniard's lips.

She herself hesitated. Perhaps she regretted her imprudent words, but pride restrained her from receding.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STRANGER.

"COURAGE. Donna Rosina," whispered Cypriana in a low tone, but not so low but that Pablo heard it.

"Miserable creature!" cried he, leaping to her. "Away this instant or I will hang you to the nearest tree. Do you hear?"

Frightened by the look and words, Cypriana moved off tremblingly.

Domingo and Benito wished to take her part, but Pablo imposed silence upon them.

"Enough," said he with that voice and imperious look before which the most intrepid would quail. "It is shameful that such men as us should lend ear to the words of that woman. She forgets that abusing her weakness and her sex to work evil is an action which all honest men should scorn."

These last words, and the accent which Pablo laid upon it, fell like fragments of ice upon Rosina's burning anger.

By a sudden reaction, she bowed her head and burst into tears.

At the same instant, the report of a gun fired by Cradle made everybody start.

"Follow me!" said the American, rushing towards the fir-trees which encircled the mountain.

Shanty, Benito and Luke followed him.

Five minutes after, they returned, bearing the body of an individual which they had found in the wood.

This man, struck to the death by the bullet of Cradle's rifle, was clad in the ordinary costume pertaining to miners.

He was either an American or Englishman.

He still respired, but could not speak, dying soon afterwards without saying one word.

"You were too hasty, Cradle," said Steel-arm. "Perhaps this unlucky man had no evil intentions."

"Why was he hiding himself?" replied the American. "He looks very suspicious. See his equipment—weapons of all kinds, and not one tool."

The stranger had, indeed, a hang-dog cast of countenance.

Steel-arm, who knew all the characters of the placers, was of Cradle's idea.

He nevertheless repeated that it was wrong to shoot him, instead of calling his comrades to capture the spy.

"But," replied Cradle, "it seemed to me that his rifle pointed at me, so if I had not shot him, he might have killed me."

"This man may belong to some band," said Pablo. "We must make a search."

"To-morrow morning, then," said Cradle. "It is dark now."

"To-morrow be it," said Steel-arm; "but it is necessary to watch well to-night."

"I fear we are surrounded by some troop of salteadores (thieves)," said Cradle. "That man has all the appearance of a spy sent to inform them of our position."

"I think like you," said Benito.

"Perhaps Goliath has met some comrade," added Vandelles.

No one replied.

All partook of the Frenchman's opinion, and the perspective of new dangers to be run made every one gloomy and silent.

It was decided that two men should be sentinels till morning.

Pablo declared that he would watch all the night.

He would have given all the world to say a few words to Bertha before she retired, but it was impossible to approach her.

When Vandelles and his wife entered their cabin, the two were under the sway of lively emotions. We have no need to explain the uneasiness with which Bertha heard her husband's inquiries without answer. If her life alone had been at stake, Bertha would simply have recounted the truth, risking all that could arrive. But, in this circumstance, she felt that her avowal would bring about an inevitable duel between Vandelles and Steel-arm. Whoever would vanquish, it would be terrible result for the young woman.

As for Vandelles, his life of excesses, in the drinking saloons, and at the gaming table, had not extinguished in his spirit all of honor. Notwithstanding his jealousy, Vandelles had always before his eyes the thirty-two thousand dollars in gold dust which came to him from Steel-arm's generosity, and which new searches might double. On the other hand, he asked himself with a certain inquietude, what would become of the expedition if it was deprived of a chief so indispensable as the gambusino. He was in fact, in the state of men who would clear up a doubt, though desiring to be deceived in their conjectures.

Instead of lying down on entering the cabin, Vandelles took a bottle of brandy and poured out a glass full.

"A moment," said he, as Bertha threw herself dressed upon the bed, "I wish to speak to you. What does the scene between you and Rosina mean?"

"I know no more than you yourself," replied the poor woman more dead than alive.

"You must agree that the moment was singularly chosen for you to allow your hand to be kissed by that Don Juan."

"He said himself to you—"

"I know what he said—but, thank God! I am not so stupid as to believe such nonsense. Are you so sure of being widowed that you already play with your lover? You should at least be careful not to be seen. You who are always talking of virtue, duty, and so on, yet—"

Animated more and more by his words, he soon reached a state of most fearful anger.

Bertha went to a corner where she rested silent and motionless, hiding her face in her hands.

This resigned grief still more exasperated Vandelles.

"Answer me, then," said he, brutally pulling her hands from her face, "instead of braving me thus."

"What can I say," replied she, weeping, "when you refuse to believe me?"

"What would Rosina say when she spoke of a circumstance which she would reveal of Steel-arm and yourself?"

"I am ignorant," responded Bertha.

"You lie," cried he, "you lie! But I will force you to tell the truth. I wish to know to what Rosina made allusion."

Bertha gave no answer.

"Bertha!" repeated he

The same silence.

"Bertha!" cried Vandelles, exasperated, seizing the hand of the young woman ever motionless. "Answer!" exclaimed he, grinding his teeth.

In his rage, he pressed her hand with so much rudeness that she let a cry of pain escape her.

"You hurt me, sir," said she.

"And what matters it?" cried he, brutally. "Reply to my question, or, by the living God—"

He did not finish in words, but the knife which he took from his belt too well explained his threat.

Bertha regarded him contemptuously, without responding.

Maddened by jealousy, more than by the brandy he had mechanically quaffed, Vandelles foamed at the mouth with rage.

No one but He above knows what he would have done in his blind fury had not two blows at the door turned aside his intention.

At this unexpected sound, he leaped to his gun and rushed to the door which opened, at the same instant giving entrance to Rosina.

"Rosina!" cried he, stupefied by a visit so unforeseen.

"Herself, senor," said the Spaniard, whose swelled and discolored eyes revealed the passage of many recent tears.

"You, at such an hour—so late!"

"It is never too late to repair a fault," said the young woman in a slightly trembling voice.

Then, unable to resist longer, she ran to kneel before Bertha.

"Pardon me," cried she tearfully, "pardon me for all the sorrow I have caused you—I was wicked and unjust to you. Oh! I can never pardon myself, never. I was mad—I knew not what I said—pardon me!"

"With all my heart," said Bertha folding her in her arms.

"You are so good," continued Rosina, "and I am ashamed of my conduct. When I was before everybody my pride sustained me; but when I recovered my coolness, when I thought of all you have done, I believed myself so contemptible that I should have done myself some evil, had not Benito restrained me. So do you really pardon me, Bertha?"

"All this is very well," said Vandelles ill-naturedly, "but allow me to speak in my turn, Donna Rosina. What was it happened between my wife and Steel-arm?"

"Nothing, sir, I assure you."

"To-day perhaps; but you spoke of other incidents, of a mystery you alone know. I shall tell all I know, you said. What do these words signify?"

"I was mad with grief, and said the first thing which came to my head," replied the Spaniard.

"But—"

"You know that we women are often quick. Pardon my folly. You were also in anger."

A hard heart alone could withstand the entreaties delivered in the sweet voice and with the caressing look of the pretty Spaniard.

So Vandelles finished by being persuaded.

As the young woman returned to Bertha, an irritated voice repeated many times the name of Rosina outside the cabin.

"Goodness! it is Benito," cried Rosina turning pale. "He is furious."

"I will conduct you to him," interrupted Vandelles, who, like some husbands, reserved all his gallantry for others' wives.

"Oh! no, no, that would enrage him still more; let me go out alone."

"I will go with you," said Bertha.

"Call him here," said Vandelles.

In answer to Rosina's cry, the capataz came running to the cabin.

"Rosina is here," said Bertha to him.

"Here—and why?"

Bertha told the most plausible story to account for Rosina's presence.

Benito still was furious.

Bertha tried to appease him, but he would not listen.

"Your husband is very angry," whispered Bertha in Rosina's ear. "I fear for you."

The Spaniard looked disdainfully at him.

"Have no fear," replied she.

"He may kill you—"

"There will be one wicked creature the less upon this world," returned she, with a sad smile; "I shall be quickly forgotten."

As she said this, she pressed Bertha's hand, and went to Benito.

"What were you doing with this Vandelles?" inquired the capataz.

She told him all in the simplest manner.

The capataz had hoped marvels from the issue of the combat between Steel-arm and Vandelles.

If the latter had been killed, he believed there would be a division of the enormous share of Vandelles.

Rosina, by destroying all his plans, made his anger rise to a boiling heat.

Rosina said nothing in reply.

Thinking deeply of Pablo and Bertha, she scarcely heard the maledictions of the maddened Mexican. She not even made a start, though he menaced her with his machete.

A scornful smile curled her lips and her flashing eyes sustained boldly and unflinchingly the ominous regard of the capataz.

The latter, overcome by this indifference and this disdain of life, threw his weapon upon the ground, and left the cabin, blaspheming by all the saints of the calendar.

As he had no more than a half-hour's time before his watch came on, he went to find Shanty, whom he was to replace.

Steel-arm was seated by the Irishman's side.

A hard task was set before Pablo.

To command men is difficult in all situations, and, above all, when the individuals were like those which Steel-arm had under his direction.

By his energy, strength, skill, character, coolness and bravery, he imposed authority upon these men with unruly passions. The particular circumstances in which Pablo was placed with Vandelles much weakened his influence. The pride, the violence, and especially the idleness of Vandelles annoyed him greatly.

It needed all the gambusino's power, all his experience, to prevent a revolt among the gold-diggers.

If he thought for an instant upon the dangers which still menaced his comrades, it was but as they threatened Bertha also.

The thought of that love inspired in Pablo such force, such confidence in himself, that he felt himself capable of struggling against any perils for her whom he loved.

These and other thoughts kept him awake all night, which passed without incident.

So also did the three following days, during which they resumed the work suspended the preceding day.

The presence of the stranger killed by Cradle much absorbed Steel-arm's attention.

It was evident to him that this man was one of a troop of miners, or perhaps some less honorable occupation.

So Pablo neglected nothing to verify his doubts in that respect. He first attempted to take the back trail of this man and to follow it to the place of his departure.

Unfortunately the rain had fallen in torrents during the night and had obliterated all the traces.

The gambusino, therefore, could not but leave to chance the direction of his searches.

In this short period, the miners gathered nearly twenty-eight pounds of gold.

This was a magnificent result, for in ordinary placers the yield of a day's labor averages two or three ounces.

Pablo who foresaw many things, thought already of departure.

He occupied himself in searching for some *cavallada mestena* (troop of wild horses).

With this design he made long excursions, accompanied by Benito and Do-

mingo, who both perfectly understood this manner of hunt.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TWO PRISONERS.

NINE days have passed since the unknown spy had been discovered and shot by Cradle.

On Saturday night, after a laborious day's work, the miners, assembled in the great cabin, were eating their repast. As Sunday was a day of repose, they prolonged the evening longer than usual.

During the previous four days, the mine had produced enormous results, powder having been employed.

They were obliged to renounce the use of this means by reason of a singular phenomenon.

Though they had not sprung a mine but on the surface of the plateau, yet the action of the powder had produced an extraordinary perturbation upon the flanks of the mountain to the place where the two branches of the Sierra Tatecas united to form the angle in the shelter of which the cabins had been constructed.

Without explaining the cause of this phenomenon, crevasses were produced between the rocks; enormous blocks of quartz, the earth having fallen from them, rested suspended above the plateau.

As there was an empty space between the cabins and the summit of the angle formed by the two mountains, the descent of these portions of earth and rock did not menace in an imminent manner the miners' safety.

Pablo, who had climbed at the peril of his life to the place where the strongest convulsion had occurred, had nevertheless remarked the little degree of consistency which the apparently solid earth presented.

Under the earth, hardened by the sun and by the action of time, which had formed a sort of crust, existed numerous crevasses.

In many of the places the rock, heterogeneously and badly incorporated, crumbled under the hand like a heap of dry sand.

This nature of the earth explained the formation of the immense cave which had served as a retreat for the Indian horse-thieves in the other branch of the sierra.

On returning from this exploration, whose result seemed to render him very uneasy, Pablo found the miners engaged in weighing the gold collected during the week. This product was magnificent, amounting to about sixty pounds of gold, the value being sixteen thousand dollars.

This sum, added to those previously obtained, brought for Vandelles the share of forty thousand dollars and to the other miners five thousand six hundred dollars as each one's portion.

When the *pepites* and nuggets were weighed, all were put into buckskin bags which Pablo, Vandelles and Ribonne sealed and finally buried beneath the earth of the great tent.

"Now, my friends," said Steel-arm, when this last operation was accomplished, "now we must make all our preparations for going next week."

"At the end of the week?" cried Cradle.

"At the beginning," replied Pablo firmly. "The plateau is exhausted and we cannot use powder, for its shock has already rendered the mountain most dangerous. Besides, I always fear that the explosions will bring to us some gang of robbers, whites or Indians, which wander about this country. Tomorrow get everything ready, and Monday we will start."

Except Domingo, Shanty and Luke, every one was against the measure.

"You are insatiable," said Steel-arm, with a feeling of disgust which he could not entirely dissimulate.

"Five thousand dollars for all our trouble is very little," cried Cradle.

"That is better than death from the robbers or the Apaches," replied Pablo. "Besides, think well, this journey is but the first. You know I promised you a second placer, for this is not the only one I know. As for the other expedition, you divide the product into equal shares, your part, joined with the five thousand six hundred dollars you already have, will give you a large sum. As for Vandelles, it seems to me that with forty thousand dollars he can live."

"A capital of forty thousand dollars is not much to live with in Paris," observed Vandelles.

"We shall live in the provinces," said Bertha revolted at this selfish cupidity.

"Thank you," replied Vandelles quickly. "I would rather recommence for some time life in the placers with all its risks and dangers."

"Listen all to me," said Pablo after a little silence. "Ponder over every one of my words before replying."

There was profound silence.

All eyes were fixed upon Steel-arm; all ears on the alert.

"The passion for gold," began Pablo, "is one of those which are never satisfied. The more you have the more you ask. Fix in advance the sum which you consider as the limit of your desire. I speak, understand, of a reasonable sum, and not of a fabulous fortune."

An instant of silence followed these words.

All were making their calculations and consulting each other.

Then of a sudden all spoke at once.

One wished twenty thousand dollars, another one hundred thousand dollars, a third fifty thousand dollars.

Benito and Domingo wanted as much gold as would fill their hats.

"Well," finally said Pablo, "have you fixed a sum?"

After a stormy discussion of quantity, Luke's hat being used as urn, amounted to the sum of eighty thousand dollars.

"You must promise not to change that," said Steel-arm. "Do you swear to go as soon as that sum is realized?"

"We swear it," chorused the miners.

"That is well," replied the gambusino. "You can then make all things ready for departure, this evening."

"What?" cried they, stupefied at this conclusion.

"Monday, a little after daybreak, I will place you where you can collect more than one hundred and twenty pounds of nuggets."

Pablo's words were received with a cheer of joy, for they never excited the least doubt.

Then questions began to shower upon the gambusino, but he refused answering.

"Monday you shall have all," said he. "Now get everything ready to go."

The miners went to work with joyful activity.

They prepared large sacks of buffalo skin to contain the little bags of gold dust.

Other sacks were made in advance for the nuggets Pablo had promised.

Benito, Domingo, and Vandelles worked to make harness for the eight horses which the gold-seekers still possessed and which grazed in the vast prairies at the foot of the plateau.

Cradle and Shanty arranged the tents and large objects to be transported.

As the baggage had to encumber them as little as possible, the cradles and the worst tools were left upon the plateau.

Seconded by Luke and Ribonne, the

three women hastened to pack up the smallest objects and to prepare clothing of which the miners had need on the journey.

Pablo went from one man to another, directing, overlooking all, and giving to each man the counsels which were suggested by experience of life in the placers, and in the forest.

Notwithstanding the general excitement fatigue soon overcame them.

At ten o'clock, Pablo gave the signal for repose.

"Who is to watch during the first hour?" demanded he.

"I," replied Ribonne.

"Then, Shanty, is it not?"

"Yes, Don Pablo."

A quarter of an hour afterwards, all were sleeping in their cabins except Steel-arm and Ribonne.

The former, who always slept upon his arms on a buffalo skin.

As for Ribonne, he walked with long strides before the cabin to resist the slumber he felt gaining upon in spite of all his efforts.

In vain he rubbed his eyes, in vain he quickened his paces and moved in different ways, his eyes closed little by little.

He marched on in a species of somnambulism, which, though his eyes were completely shut, left him the power of marching on his round.

At about one hundred and fifty paces from him, some objects, the profound obscurity not permitting the form to be distinguished insensibly approached.

From time to time, these mysterious objects stopped and remained entirely motionless.

Then, when Ribonne had moved farther away, they continued their slow and cautious progress.

Soon they rested motionless save he who marched at their head.

This one advanced on his hands and knees with as much patience as skill.

On reaching the track which Ribonne followed in his mechanical round the man hid himself behind a rock of a foot in height.

At the moment when Ribonne passed by the side of this ambushed man, the latter bounded like a tiger-cat upon the Frenchman. With his left hand he clutched him by the throat and with his right buried a dagger in his breast.

Ribonne fell back with a groan.

The murderer gave him many stabs till he was sure of his death; then he returned to his comrades.

Fortunately for the miners, the sound of poor Ribonne's fall had reached Steel-arm's ears.

The gambusino grasped his gun and cautiously searched around him with a piercing glance.

Then he went to the side where he thought to find Ribonne.

Surprised at not hearing the sentinel's steps, Pablo foresaw some attack.

He bent down and crawled forward with infinite precaution.

Soon his hands encountered a human body.

He pulled them back full of blood.

Then he stopped, laid his ear upon the ground, and listened, retaining his breath.

A sound, imperceptible but to an Indian or a hunter, came to the gambusino's ears.

He returned to the cabin, still creeping, and awoke the miners.

Then while Domingo warned Benito, Rosina, and Cypriana, and while Cradle did the same duty for Vandelles, Pablo gave some orders.

"They are whites," said he in a low, quick voice. "I saw the barrels of their rifles glitter. They are coming to the cabins. Let the women retire to the corner of the mountains. You lie

down behind the rocks you will find in this place. Not a word, not a movement before my signal. Luke and Shanty go to the women. You others follow me without your hats or shoes, with your guns in your hands. Do not pull a trigger till I say, fire!"

The miners in a minute or two had reached the spot where Ribonne had been killed.

Besides the obscurity of night, they were protected by the shadows of the cabins.

Without a word Pablo placed his hand upon the shoulder of Vandelles who crept before him, and with his finger pointed to a little light, scarcely visible, thirty paces or more from them.

The light came from the bright barrel of a gun, or an unsheathed knife.

Vandelles warned his right hand neighbor who transmitted the intelligence to all.

An instant after, Pablo placed his lips almost to the ear of Vandelles and said:

"You, Luke and Domingo will fire at my first signal. Shanty, Cradle and I will fire at the flash of our enemies' fire. You others will fire at the brilliant point I showed to you."

Vandelles transmitted the order with the same precaution as at first.

The bright spark stopped from time to time, and around it appeared sometimes other, though more feeble, lights not more than twenty paces from the miners.

"Fire!" cried Pablo.

Three reports sounded as one from the miners.

Eighteen detonations replied almost instantly from their enemies.

But, at the same moment, Pablo, Shanty and Cradle fired upon the men whom they perceived from the flash of their pieces.

During this time, the three other miners had seized the loaded guns carried by Benito and Cypriana.

The latter held also three other rifles to the gold-hunters who had fired the last.

Rapid steps sounded upon the rock, and human forms, the darkness preventing their number being ascertained, appeared a few steps from the miners.

"Fire!" cried Steel-arm again.

Five shots were heard this time, answered by yells of rage and pain.

Some of the assailants fell upon the earth; the others made a halt.

Two only rushed on.

Pablo, who had not fired, sent a ball at one, striking him in the side.

Vandelles threw himself down in the other's path, and he fell, letting his rifle escape him.

Before he could make a movement, Pablo cleaved his head with his machete.

Disconcerted by this reception, the attacking party made a retreat.

As for the miners, they hastened to recharge their weapons.

"I think we shall be left tranquil for this night," said Cradle.

"Yes," said Vandelles, "but, to-morrow—"

"That is the question," replied Cradle.

"What shall we do now?" asked Vandelles of Steel-arm.

"We must make some prisoners," said Pablo. "Domingo!"

"Senor," replied the vaquero.

"Follow me, with your knife and lasso ready. We must lasso some of their wounded and bring them here."

One or two minutes passed.

Then they heard a stifled cry and the sound of a struggle.

Soon Pablo and Domingo appeared, dragging after them two prisoners.

That of Domingo, swooned and covered with blood, could not have given him much pains to capture.

The Gold Guide.

Pablo had the other by the throat, and he was half strangled by the iron grasp of the gambusino.

One was an Englishman; the other a Spanish-Mexican.

"Don Pablo," said Shanty in a low tone, "the man whom you struck with the machete still breathes."

"Do not kill him. Domingo, Cradle, and Shanty, remain here and tell me of the least sound. Luke, come with me and look for the eight pounds of gold which were left after making up the ten pound bags in the cabin."

As he spoke these words, Pablo relaxed his iron grip and gave respiration; Domingo's captive, whom Vandelles had pinioned, commenced also to come to life.

"At the first cry, you are dead!" said Steel-arm placing his navaja to the English prisoner.

Vandelles made the same threat to his man.

"Listen," said Pablo, dragging his captive farther away than the Mexican might not hear his replies; "you see this bag; it contains eight pounds of gold. If you answer the truth, it shall be yours. If you lie, this knife goes to your heart. I am called Steel-arm," added he, certain of the effect the name would have. "Tell me the truth."

"Yes," responded the wounded man with difficulty.

"Remember if you lie, I shall kill both of you. How many are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"I heard only fifteen or sixteen shots."

"Six of us are not to arrive till tomorrow."

"Why?"

"They were sent to spy out the tracks which penetrate to the right of the mountain."

"About nine days ago we shot a man prowling around our camp: did he belong to your troop?"

"A large man?"

"With a very thick beard, blue eyes, a scar on his right temple and a piece of his lip cut away."

"That is John Poker of Massachusetts. He was sent out for scout."

"What did you think of his disappearance?"

"That he was killed by a grizzly, or discovered and shot by you."

"Who led you here?"

"Goliath the American."

"You came to murder and rob us? Reply!"

"Yes."

"Of what is your band composed?"

"Men of all nations: English, French, Spanish, Americans. And nine salteadores of Manuelito's band."

"This is the actual chief of your gang?"

"Manuelito; but Goliath has more authority than he. Goliath did not wish to attack you this night for he thought we could not surprise you. Manuelito decided against him."

"What did Goliath want you to do?"

"He wanted us to await the return of the six absent men. He said it was best for us to hide in the wood, and wait till you went to hunt to attack the other miners."

"Do you believe we shall be attacked again to-night?"

"I do not."

"How many of your comrades do you think we shot?"

"Five or six at least."

"Have you spoken the truth? Remember the alternative, before I question your companion."

"I have spoken the truth."

"Cradle, watch this man. If he keeps still, do not harm him; but if he moves, kill him on the instant."

Steel-arm advanced towards Domingo's prisoner, who had recovered his senses but whose life's blood escaped from a fearful wound.

Scarcely had a few questions been put to him than he expired.

He had said enough, however, to prove the veracity of Dick Burnell, the English man.

Unfortunately for the latter, he had taken advantage of Cradle's ruse, who pretended sleep, to make an attempt at flight, bound as he was.

Before he moved three steps, Cradle's bowie-knife had cleft his skull.

"An enemy the less," muttered the American, wiping the bloody blade upon the clothing of the Englishman.

Then he went to inform Steel-arm of the execution.

The latter for five or six minutes was plunged into thought.

Every one awaited his speaking anxiously, for they felt that on him alone depended the safety of all.

Those who have thus far followed the train of this interesting narrative of life in the El Dorado, will learn what was Steel-arm's stratagem and its result by perusing the sequel, "THE DEATH TRACK."

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